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Before me a Notary Public in and for the State and County aforesaid, personally appeared S. A. Everitt, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Treasurer of Doubleday, Page & Company, owners of The Frontier and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse side of *this form, to wit*:

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By S. A. Everitt, *Treasurer*.

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[SEAL] (*Signed*) *William W. Thornton*
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VOL. 1, NO. 3 DECEMBER, 1924

HARRY E. MAULE, Editor

A. H. BITTNER Associate Editor

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Where everyone is welcome to have his say

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for

JANUARY

MICKY MALONE FROM SAN ANTONE
A Novelette

Clem Yore

Hounded by a crooked sheriff, Micky headed into the desert and found action aplenty

COWBOYS
Editorial — *Stewart Edward White*

As they were in their heyday—and as some of them are today

THE SEA GYPSY
A complete Novel

Albert Richard Wetjen

From Mexico to the South Seas led this trail of vengeance

THE SNARE
A Novelette

The Apaches shunned this man-trap cave, but jovial Bill Caxton gloated over it

INTO DEVIL'S DOMAIN
A Novelette

Edwin Hunt Hoover

The inaccessible Devil's Domain will always be a frontier—and a secure refuge from the law

PETTICOAT MAROONERS
Eugene Cunningham

Aboard the *Vengeance* with Bart Skyrm and his pirate crew

THE FEAST OF THE SEVEN WOMEN
Oscar Schisgall

Pioneering in the heart of South America

BLACK JACK—WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE
Arthur Chapman

A graduate from rustling was Black Jack Ketchum—with the advanced art of bank- and train-robbing before him

AND OTHERS

Ready For You on December 20th

A Reglar

By L. B. Cullen Jones

THERE'S a reekin', rollin' river
That marks a far frontier,
In a sullen, desert country
Where you pray that God is near.

There is someone there a-watchin',
He is ridin' all around;
He patrols the Southern border
While you're sleepin' safe and sound.

And those feverish, boilin' islands
In the Eastern tropic zone,
Where the natives mark your head-piece
For a choice spot in their home.

There is someone there in khaki
With a rifle shinin' bright,
He is marchin' while it's daytime
And a-guardin' you at night.

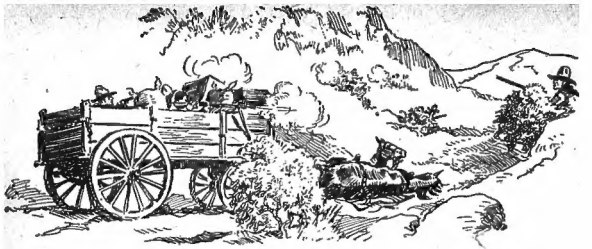
There's a lonesome, icy snowland
Up north of fifty-eight;
It's a frozen hell in winter
That you comfort-lovers hate.

There is someone there a-scoutin'
And a-skeein' up and down;
He is keepin' law and order
In each distant minin' town.

Don't forget that strip of water
Through the neck of jungle cut,
It's no place for white 'uns either—
You wouldn't live there, but——

There is someone there a-waitin'
For a frolic or a fray;
He is oilin' up his trigger—
For you need that waterway.

While you swim in worldly pleasures
He's on duty night and day;
He's a trooper or a doughboy;
He's a Reg'lar, U. S. A.



THE VALLEY OF STRIFE

By MARSHALL R. HALL

Only the Chinese cook remained loyal to the harried owner of the Swinging J ranch when Clive Morgan, ex-Ranger and wandering cowpuncher, roamed into Cottonwood Valley and took a hand in the game—a game in which the ranchers and gunmen were the players; six-guns and rifles the cards and chips, a cattle empire the stake

CHAPTER I

CLIVE FINDS A MYSTERY

CLIVE MORGAN stamped out the last remnant of his breakfast fire and turned to the stalwart black horse that grazed nearby at the end of a picket rope. His light traveling pack was already rolled and tied in position behind the cantle of his saddle. He threw the ensemble across the black, talking gently into the animal's left ear as he drew the cinch tight.

"We got to be on our way, Thunder, old hoss. We got to find a job if we're a-goin' to keep on eatin'. 'Course, yuh old sinner, yuh ain't got no worries on that score, for all yuh need is some lush grass and yo're happy; but yore Uncle Dudley, now—well, that's a heap different, as the feller says."

He swung lightly into the saddle, touching a match to the end of a brown-paper cigarette and pinching out the blaze with careful fingers before tossing the charred ember aside. Then he urged the horse through the tiny stream beside which he had camped and turned down the dim trail he had followed for days through the vastness of the Mogollon range.

An hour later horse and rider came out on a narrow bench, down which the trail wound precipitously. High overhead hung the perfect blue of the Arizona sky, while on either hand the painted ribs of the range glowed amber and crimson, yellow and brown. In the canyons and gorges the deeper shades of purple and blue-black blended in sublime harmony. Fresh and dry and warm, the air carried the pungent scent of wild choke-cherries, just coming into bloom; of acrid, gray-blue sage and strong palo verde. Indian paint brushes nodded gay plumes, brightening the scene but lending no aroma to the fragrant breeze.

Stretching far off on either hand and straight ahead was a valley—literally a paradise. Blanketed with the first spring coat of lush grass and studded liberally with clumps of cottonwood, the valley spread away in three directions.

To the north towering peaks finally rose up to hem it in. Straight out and across the broad, level acres more lofty pinnacles of the Mogollons reared their somber crests toward the sky. To the south the mountains closed in again, but not so abruptly. In that direction a saddle in the range indicated that a pass existed, affording comparatively easy ingress and egress for the denizens of the valley. To the west were the main peaks of the Mog-

ollons, from which Clive was now emerging.

"That shore is a likely lookin' prospect for us, Thunder," he chattered. "See them cows? See them ranches all scattered up and down the river? Don't that look like home, old-timer? We got to find a job here, and that's all there is to it. Get along now, and mind yore manners when we hit civilization ag'in."

Thunder moved easily and rapidly down out of the hills, never slackening his pace. The valley, from Clive's recent vantage point, had seemed extremely near, but he knew this was partly because of the dry clearness of the Arizona air. Therefore, he was not surprised when his watch told him a good three hours had elapsed before his horse emerged from the last out-jutting point of the foothills and turned out across the valley's fertile soil.

Then began a day devoted to that which Clive hated more than anything else in the world—hunting a job. An hour after entering the valley he rode into a well-kept ranchyard and looked around. An air of silence hung over the place, and the usual jovial atmosphere of the Western cattle ranch was distinctly lacking. A hatchet-faced man was sitting on the corral fence and Clive asked him concerning prospects for a job. A surly negative was the only response.

Clive turned down a narrow road leading to what seemed to be the main highway, a highway that led off toward the saddle in the hills, miles and miles to the south. It was two hours before he reached the next ranch.

Here his reception was even more cool. It was almost noon and the tantalizing odor of cooking things, wafting from the kitchen, caused his mouth to water and his stomach to gnaw. He had visions of a sumptuous dinner surrounded by a crowd of boisterous buckaroos, but his visions were short-lived.

A gruff-voiced foreman with only one eye and a badly mutilated ear informed him no hands were needed, and intimated that it would be as well if he skedaddled right along. Once again Clive was impressed with the air of unnatural quiet. Back on the highway he meditated sourly.

"Fine bunch of dodderin' old dodo birds them fellers is. What in hell's wrong with everybody? Yuh'd think, by cripes, I was a cow thief, the way they looks at me and insinooates my absence is preferred to muh comp'ny. Aw, shucks, Thunder; mebbe they just got indigesting or somethin'. We'll try the next place."

Still heading south, he fancied he was about midway of the valley. He had no way of telling how long it would be before he came across another ranch, but he did know it would be a considerable time, for before him there were only vistas of undulating green, clumps of cottonwood, and grazing herds. Off to his right, a long, snaky line of willows and higher, greener cottonwoods told him a river threaded its way, probably the stream he had seen earlier in the day from his vantage point on the bench. He found the road was heading toward it.

AFTER a time he passed what apparently was the last of the line fences and came out on a vast territory of range-land, an ideal cattle country. Scattered herds of unattended steers grazed here, and save for the gray-blue clumps of sage, scrub cottonwood, and an occasional saguaro cactus, the earth was a solid mass of tall, luscious grass. The river drew nearer and Thunder pricked up his ears at the promise of a drink.

Keen and sharp, like the crack of a bull-whip, the report of a rifle crashed through the stillness of the valley. Clive reined in Thunder and gazed at a tiny wisp of pale smoke that curled upward from some scrub willows, a hundred yards ahead. His impulse was to drop from the black's back and seek shelter, but when a second report split the silence he decided there was something ahead that was worth investigating.

Clive touched his stirrups to the horse's sides. His right hand swung loosely near the bone-handled grip of a .45 which hung at his hip. As he neared the willows his body tensed and his gray eyes became more alert. Nothing happened. With a rush he rounded the willows and paused on the brink of the stream, a startled oath on his lips.

In the middle of the river was a buckboard. The waters swirled and foamed in an angry torrent across the bodies of two dead horses that were still fast in the traces. In the seat, her body rigid and her eyes fear-filled, sat a girl.

She was dressed in a flaring tan skirt and white shirt-waist, while from her throat hung a brilliant scarlet muffler. Her head was bare and crowned with a mass

of soft brown hair. Her face was pale, but her fear had not driven the vivid scarlet from her lips, nor marred the perfect contour of her features.

As Clive, staring at her, regained his breath and started to call out, the girl saw him. In a flash her rigid pose vanished and the fear in her eyes was replaced by flaring hate. Her right hand moved upward and forward. Clive saw the gleam of sunlight on the nickeled barrel of a revolver and even as she shot she dropped from the saddle and rolled swiftly into the protecting willows.

"What the hell?" he cried in surprise. Then, regaining his poise, he peered cautiously through the slender trunks. The girl was standing, but her revolver was no longer aimed; instead, it hung at her side and she obviously was seeking a glimpse of him.

"Whoever you are, I beg your pardon," she apologized. "I thought it was you who shot my horses, but I see I was mistaken. Please come out."

Clive raised his head a trifle.

"Are yuh dead shore yuh won't take no more pot shots at me, ma'am?" he called.

"I sha'n't shoot," she replied. "I see by your horse that you are not the man I took you for. He was riding a piebald."

Clive left the willow-clump and regained his mount, swinging lightly into the saddle and urging the animal forward and into the stream.

"Yuh seem to be havin' a heap of trouble, ma'am," he observed mildly. "Can I help yuh any?"

"You can help me out of this buckboard and set me on dry land," she answered, thrusting her gun into a business-like holster that swung from a belt about her slender waist.

Clive set his hat slantingly on his moist brown locks and maneuvered his horse close to the buckboard. The girl stepped to the top of a wheel and leaned toward him. He reached out and clasped her in one arm, swinging her against his side. Holding her thus, he pointed his pony's head toward the opposite shore.

He felt the girl's lithe form pressed against him, felt the cling of her soft, firmly-moulded arms. A wisp of her hair blew across his face and he breathed some subtle perfume. His arm held her firmly.

Twenty feet beyond the water's edge he stopped the black, leaned down and deposited the girl gently on her feet. Then he dropped quickly from the saddle and stood before her, hat in hand.

"There yuh are, ma'am," he said easily. "I'm oncommon su'prised at findin' yuh like I did, and I'd plumb admire to be a-hearin' how yuh come to be in such a dang' onhandy fix."

The girl's face was still pale and he saw that she was trembling. It was the reaction from the strain of her recent adventure working on her, and he suggested that she find a seat on a fallen willow nearby; but she shook her head, her eyes darting about her, a worried look in their depths.

She gazed at him searchingly and perhaps something she saw in his eyes made her more at ease. After a moment she spoke.

"I was where you found me because a hidden gunman shot my horse." She endeavored to make her voice firm. "I think he heard your horse's hoof-beats and was frightened off. At first I thought you were his confederate; that is why I shot at you."

"But what's the idea of anybody shootin' yore hosses, ma'am?"

It was a natural question under the circumstances, and one that ordinarily would call for an answer. The girl shook her head, a little sadly.

"I don't know you, nor how much I can say to you. I have said things before, to my sorrow. What outfit are you riding for?"

For the first time Clive grinned.

"Me? I'm a-workin' for the first hombre that hires me. Just at the present my only occupation is huntin' a place to sling my turkey and shove muh feet under a chuck table. In short, as yuh prob'ly surmise by now, I ain't got any more job than a horned-toad's got whiskers."

The girl appeared surprised and a little suspicious. Clive found himself wondering if she were about to exhibit the same spirit of sullen unrest he had found elsewhere in this valley: if she, too, were going to turn out to be sour and surly. She looked at him keenly.

"Then what on earth are you doing here?"

"I'm a-doin' the most natural thing in the world, ma'am—lookin' for a job, and I'm a-needin' one mighty bad."

"How long have you been here?" she questioned.

"I s'pose yuh mean how long since I hit this valley, and it ain't no trouble to answer that. I blowed out of the Mogollons this mornin' shortly after sunrise."

The girl was betraying fresh symptoms of indecision and anxiety.

"I hardly know how to take you," she responded. "However, we can't remain here. That rifleman may return and he may bring help."

"Whatever yuh say," replied Clive. "But where'll we go?"

The girl again glanced at him keenly.

"Will your horse carry double?" she asked.

"Ma'am, that horse'll do most anything I tell him, even to tryin' to stand on his haid. You just climb aboard and I'll swing up behind yuh; then we'll be off whichever way yuh want to head."

FOR a half hour they rode in silence through rich range-land. There were no fences anywhere, and Clive recognized the fact that they were crossing open range, where the herds of a dozen outfits had been turned out to graze pending the round-up and the sorting of brands. It was any man's land and no man's land, all in one. After a while the girl straightened a little in the saddle, then pulled Thunder sharply to the right and they set off along a dimly outlined wagon trail.

Clive ventured a question.

"I take it you're headed for a ranch, ma'am?"

She gave a dis-spirited nod.

"We are going to the Swinging J," she replied. "That is, we are going to what is left of it."

"Would they, do yuh think, now, be a-needin' of a top hand over that-a-way?"

At this the girl laughed mirthlessly.

"Now I know you are a stranger here," she said, "else you would not be asking that question. The Swinging J just now is little more than a name."

"It shore does seem that I just naturally can't pick up a job nohow," Clive sighed. "It's gettin' to be plumb oncanny, by cripes."

The girl was instantly sympathetic, turning her head so she could see his face.

"If there was any place for you on the Swinging J I would gladly give it to you. But just now the Swinging J ranch consists of some thousands of acres of ground, a few steers, one Chinaman—and myself. Even the steers and the Chink may be gone before we arrive," she finished bitterly.

"Yuh shore have got me guessin', ma'am," Clive pondered. "Would this Swingin' J, now, by any chance be yore'n?"

She nodded.

"'At ain't none of my business, like, but I'd plumb admire to be knowin' if yuh be'n havin' trouble with yore ranch. Somehow, I gets the impression all ain't merry here, so's to speak."

The girl laughed again, grimly.

"Trouble?" she repeated. "That is all I've had; all I have known since I came here to live, and it has finally driven me to the point where I am getting out."

"Are yuh aimin' to sell yore holdin's here, ma'am?"

"Who would buy? No, I shall not sell. The Swinging J range will revert to what it was before I came to it. For ten years it lay idle and run down, free range for all the cowmen of this valley. Then I came here and started my own herds and have had a constant fight ever since."

"Then yo're sort of quittin' under fire, like?" Clive's voice held a subtle barb, and it evidently went home, as he intended it should.

"What do you know about it, Mister Man?" she retorted sharply. "You don't know what I've gone through; you don't know what it is to watch your herds vanish, see your hands turn traitor and leave you, see your lands overrun by herds that legally have no right there, and—yes, even be threatened with an invasion of sheep!"

"Hell!" he ejaculated. "I beg yore pardon, ma'am; that sorta slipped out. When yuh said 'sheep' I just naturally had to swear."

"Granted," she answered. "Now, we are coming to the ranch. I have enough supplies to set us up a hot meal and then you might as well be riding on. Perhaps you can pick up something at Benders, about twelve miles south of me. If you wish, you are welcome at the Swinging J for the time being, even though I have no job to offer you."

"Thank yuh, ma'am," he said gently. "I shore would like to ketch on down this-a-way. Yuh see I've always hankered to punch cows in Arizony. I generally have ranged up around Montany, but the winters there sorta got to me and I drifted into Wyomin'. That wasn't no better and I lit into Texas, where I hooked up with the Rangers for a spell. But I got lonesome for cows and tired of man-rustlin' all the time, and, wantin' to git out this-a-way, I chucked the Ranger business and here I am. Begins to look like it's a-goin' to be 'here I go' in a minute, though."

"So you were a Ranger?" A new interest was in the girl's voice.

"Yeh," he answered carelessly. "I was with them Texas riders 'bout three years."

"I'm glad you told me that;" she said. "I feel, somehow, that my first judgment of you was correct. You are an honest man and not allied with the valley crowd that is seeking to drive me off my own range."

He started.

"I'm beginnin' to see things better, ma'am. Yo're in trouble here and yuh thought I was one of that flea-bitten bunch that's after yuh; now, didn't yuh? Well, yuh c'n just revise yore opinion."

"I have," she replied. "What is your name?" For the first time she evinced interest in him from a personal standpoint.

"Clive Morgan," he answered promptly. "In the Rangers they called me 'Tex.'"

"My name is Glade," said the girl. "My parents saw fit to tack onto me the front name of Forest; rather silly, isn't it?"

Clive considered a moment, a grin on his face.

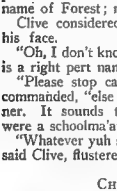
"Oh, I don't know, ma'am; Forest Glade is a right pert name, seems to me."

"Please stop calling me 'ma'am,'," she commanded, "else I won't ask you to dinner. It sounds too much as though I were a schoolma'am."

"Whatever yuh say, ma'—I mean, miss," said Clive, flustered briefly.

CHAPTER II

CLIVE MAKES A RESOLVE



LOOKING over the girl's shoulder, Clive saw a huge grove of cottonwoods, in which rested a rambling building of dirty white, having every appearance of being run down and neglected. To the rear of this structure and just outside the cottonwoods was a large barn. Near this was a corral, but it held pitifully few horses. The paint on the buildings were faded and worn, while fences needed repairs. The corral sagged in a dozen places and the plows, mowing machine and such tools as were visible were rusty and broken. The barn doors hung on hinges that were loose, the bunkhouse windows were shattered in a dozen places. Weeds and grass grew high and rank even in the yard about the house.

"Yuh shore I ain't a-troublin' yuh none about this eatin' here?" he asked, after unsaddling his horse and turning it into the corral.

"On the contrary, I am glad to have you," she answered. "Besides, I haven't thanked you for coming to my aid out there on Cougar Creek. I probably would have had to wade ashore and walk all the way here if you had not so providentially happened along."

"That brings back what yuh was a-sayin' when we arrived here," Clive said. "Are yuh really leavin' this place, Miss Glade, or are yuh bein' drove off?"

There was a defiant light in her eyes and a bitterness in her voice when she answered.

"From your way of looking at things, I am being driven away. Not that it concerns you, but in answer to your question."

"I knowed I was a-hornin' into somethin' that was none of my business," he countered contritely, "but it was 'cause I hated to see yuh bein' chased off yore own ranch like yuh was some danged c'yote or wolf that I spoke. Why don't yuh stay and fight 'em, miss?"

Wearily, Forest shook her head, her despondency again upon her, stifling the brief flare of spirit she had shown.

"It is useless. I cannot fight them alone and I cannot get hands to come here and help me to run the ranch. I am constantly being made the victim of raids and rustling parties. Today, out of all the stock I owned not more than a year ago, I have fewer than a thousand head. They are running wild on the range at this very minute and I am unable to round them up, count them and sell them."

"Shucks, miss; it seems to me the main trouble yo're up ag'in right now is to get enough hands to fight yore battles. If yuh had a bunch of hard-ridin' hombres down here that wouldn't be afraid to sling a six-gun or pull on a rope yuh'd be all set for a finish fight. Ain't that so?"

"In a way, that is true, Mr. Morgan. Had my hands remained loyal and helped me to run down the raiders who thinned my herds, poisoned my water-holes and shot my horses, then there might have been a different story to tell."

"Then why don't yuh send out and get another flock of riders and start the old ball a-rollin' ag'in?"

"It would be too expensive for me now. My bank account has never been large since I bought this ranch, and I depended on my cattle to swell it. Instead of selling my stock as they fattened, I have lost them to thieves."

"Miss Glade, mebbe it sounds persumin' and all that, but would yuh mind tellin' me more about yore troubles here? I got a idee and if I knowed just how things stand mebbe we could work out somethin'."

"Oh, I don't mind telling you," she said. "I bought the ranch from a girl friend in college who was consumptive and needed money badly. It took almost all the money my father had left to me to do it. She had never seen the ranch, knowing it only from descriptions her father had given her while he was living, but she had papers and legal data that indicated it was worth every cent I paid for it, perhaps more. She died soon after selling to me and I came here to claim my property.

"I arrived in the spring of the year and found I had bought a small empire here in Cottonwood Valley. My brand was the Swinging J and fifteen hands tended my herds, as the attorneys had had everything attended to in the matter of stocking the ranch. The buildings were in poor shape, due to the ten years the place had been unoccupied, and I intended having everything fixed up, I never had the opportunity.

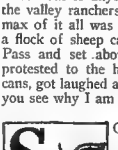
"The second week after my arrival a committee of five men called on me. They told me the ranch had lain idle for so many years it had come to be looked on as open range. The cowmen hereabouts, they said, with their ranches already overstocked, and the open range also crowded, had taken advantage of the Swinging J grass to increase their herds and allowed the overflow to graze here. Naturally, my coming forced this overflow back into the home herds and there was not sufficient room on most of the ranches to accommodate them.

"They made me an offer to buy the ranch, but the sum was so pitifully small that I refused it. Then they insinuated that cattle raising was poor business for an inexperienced girl, and that I probably would lose everything I had put into the venture. They hinted darkly about rustlers who infested the valley, spoke of water-holes that were poisoned mysteriously, and what not. They even said a big sheepman was figuring on turning flocks onto this range. Without fence, I would naturally be helpless.

"A week later one of my riders found a number of my cattle lying dead at a water-hole. Investigation showed it had been poisoned. Then, other holes were poisoned and finally my herds were raided and two hundred selected steers were stolen. I appealed to the sheriff at Sunset, forty miles away, and he spent a week here. When he left he advised me to get out, saying that it was impossible for him to trace down those who were persecuting me and that it would be useless for me to call on him again, unless there was a killing.

"In the course of the next few weeks my hands quit a few at a time, bribed, I suppose, by those who are fighting me. I brought in new ones and they quit, too. After a time I could get no men from anywhere and meantime my herds kept right on dwindling. Two months ago my last rider left and since then I have watched the herds grow smaller and smaller. What you saw today was the first actual attempt against my person.

"So, now I have only enough money left to recoup if I could get faithful men; not enough to risk unless I know the men would be true to me. Recently I offered to sell out to anyone who would buy, but the valley ranchers laugh at me. The climax of it all was reached last week when a flock of sheep came in over Saddleback Pass and set about eating my grass. I protested to the herders, who are Mexicans, got laughed at and gave it up. Now, you see why I am leaving."



SO INTERESTED Clive had become that he let his meal grow cold. Now he attacked it vigorously, while a furrow plowed itself across his brow. After a time he looked up.

"Miss Glade, it seems funny these ranchers would go so far to steal yore land, and I reckon there's somethin' behind it all," he said. "Now, yuh can't get no help from the sheriff of this man's county, so, by cripes, the next best thing is the gun. If yuh'll just say the word, danged if I won't stay here with yuh and together we'll raise a merry little hell with them cow-thieves and low-down, ornery skunks."

For an instant a gleam of hope flickered in her eyes, then it died out. Wearily she shook her head.

"No, Mr. Morgan, that will not do. You and I would be two, and of course I would not count in the business you suggest. In the valley are ten enormous ranches. Each has from fifteen to thirty hands. You would be one against nearly three hundred. I thank you, but it is hopeless."

"Who said anything about just you and

me alone?" Clive demanded, his jaw set pugnaciously. "S'posin' yuh had, say, twenty of the all-firedest, hell-spittin'est riders that ever rode a bronc 'thout pullin' leather, down here? What then?"

"But I've told you I cannot afford to gamble on them remaining," she reminded him. "I could pay them, of course, but it would only be worth it to me if I could know positively I would retrieve what little I have left for a fresh start."

"Say, Miss Glade, if yuh'll say the word I'll have a bunch of hell-roarers down here in jig time that won't ask no pay ontil yuh get set and are goin' strong, just so long as yuh can find 'em a place to sleep and plenty of chuck. I'll be among 'em. In fact, I'll be yore foreman and yuh can gamble the last dollar yuh got left that what that bunch'll do to this valley will look like what Rome was when Nero throwed away his dang' fiddle."

A light dawned in her eyes, a light of hope—and a light that somehow seemed to say she had faith in Clive to carry out the daring plan at which he had hinted.

"Do you mean——"

He interrupted.

"I mean just what I say. I come over this-a-way lookin' for a job. Well, there ain't none, so far's I can see, so, by cripes, I'm a-goin' to whittle one out for muhse'f. If I get back yore ranch and yore cows and clean up this place, I'm a-goin' to ask yuh to keep me on here permanent like, and mebbe some of the boys I'll round up'll want to stay likewise."

On the instant, forgetting the remainder of her meal, she caught his enthusiasm.

"Oh, if you only could!" she said, with a little, glad cry.

"I will," he returned. "And while I'm about it I'll find out what's back of all these goin's-on, for it ain't natural for them ranchers to act so on their own hook."

"If you can do all you have hinted at, Mr. Morgan, you would never leave here save of your own volition, that's how permanent you would be on the Swinging J."

He rose, one hand resting on the table, a smile on his face.

"Then, it's a bargain, Miss Glade! In effect yuh'll sorta turn things over to me for a spell and let me work out my own plans ag'in this crowd?"

She rose with him, hand extended, inviting his.

"It is a bargain. Go as far as you like. If I am to lose the Swinging J it seems to me, after all, that I could accept the blow with fewer tears if I went down fighting. And—and—thank you for your offer."

He gripped her hand an instant.

"Then I can consider muhse'f officially on the job, so's to speak?" he asked.

"From this instant," she agreed.

"First off, then, I want to use yore Chink. Yuh say it's forty mile to Sunset. Tell me, is there a telygraph office there?"

"Surely," she said. "The Z. L. & G. goes through the town. Of course, you may use Charley Long."

"I want that Chink to take a batch of telygrams down to Sunset and send 'em off as fast as the wire'll carry 'em."

"You will want him to start in the morning?"

"Tomorrow? Shucks, miss, tomorrow's a long ways off. Besides, if anybody sees him a-goin' out that pass they might suspicion somethin' and stop him, and I don't want that. No, sir-ee, Bob. Charley gets out this very night, after it's dark, and I want him to scoot like greased lightnin' so's he'll be in Sunset by mornin'."

"Very well," said Forest. "I shall tell him at once."

He heard her voice in the kitchen and Charley Long's sing-song tones raised in brief replies. Then both emerged into the dining-room and the Chinaman did an unusual thing: he advanced toward Clive and looked him squarely in the eye for a long moment.

"Yo' help missey?" he demanded.

Clive nodded.

"Then I help yo'. But you no fool missey, else Chat-ley Long stick 'em knife along yo'."

Clive laughed, pleased at the show of loyalty.

"Charley," he said, "yo're a Chink, but I reckon yo're all square, four ways from Sunday."

Silently the white man and the yellow man gripped hands. Then Clive tramped into the living-room and, after a laborious half hour with paper and pencil, handed Charley the telegrams and a gold-piece.

"You take them there telygrams, Charley, and you send 'em *pronto*. They'll bring a reg'lar fire storm down on this valley hell bent for election."

The Chinaman stuffed the missives inside his blouse and soft-footed away, to await darkness and his trip through the pass.

"Now, where's them dang sheep yuh said was on yore place?" Clive turned to Forest.

"They are on the south fork of Cougar Creek, near the southern end of the ranch.

There are three or four thousand of them."

"Just got one herder and three-four dogs?"

"There are five herders and I don't know how many dogs."

"Huh," he snorted. "That means they're set for trouble. On'y one herder and three dogs needed for three-four thousand sheep. I know, 'cause I seen more sheep in Montany than I ever seen cows."

At dusk Charley Long left the ranch mounted on a fleet bay that somehow had escaped the hands of the marauders. A short time later Clive, tired and sleepy, bade Forest good night and strode to the bunkhouse. Fifteen minutes later he had his blankets inside, had cleaned out a bunk, and was fast asleep.

CHAPTER III

THE WAR BEGINS

THE week that followed was a busy one for Clive; a week filled with hope for Forest. He did not visit the scene of the sheep camp, nor did he bother any of the valley ranchers. He had retrieved the buckboard from its place in the waters of Cougar Creek and the barn doors now hung tightly and swung true on well oiled hinges. The sags in the corral fence had disappeared and the little picket fence that surrounded the ranch-house stood, graceful and proud, for all to see.

Charley Long had returned on the second night and had informed Clive that his messages had been forwarded as per schedule. Thereafter he worked side by side with the former Ranger.

Finally came a night when all was finished that they could attend to for the time being. Clive for some days had been cheered by the change that had come over Forest. Her face was now vivacious and happy and her eyes were brilliant; there was color in her cheeks.

They sat beside the big kerosene lamp in the living-room. It was almost midnight when Clive looked at the clock on the wall and reached for his hat.

"Time for me to be a-goin'," he said. "Tomorrow may be a busy day. Most any time now some of the boys'll be showin' up and I want to be out to greet 'em."

Came a clatter of hoofs outside. Like a flash Clive dropped his hat and bent over the light, blowing it out with a single puff. Then, hand swinging lightly near his gun, he approached the door. A hail sounded from without.

"Hello in there. This the Swingin' J ranch?"

Clive gave a whoop and his hand left his gun. With a bound he was through the door and clattering down the veranda steps, making his way with long, swinging strides toward three silhouettes that sat calmly astride horses in the starlight.

"Shad Stevens, yuh wall-eyed old porpoise, yuh got here, didn't yuh?" he yelled as he dashed forward. "Who's with yuh?"

"Howdy, Tex," said three voices in unison.

Clive, hearing the tones, identified the other two riders.

"Honey Malloy, yuh walrus, how are y' h? And that other galoot, that spavined old he-wolf, that's Bull Ellerby, I'm bettin' muh hat."

With a bound he was among them and they slid from their mounts. Hands pumped and hands thumped backs. Came a clamor of voices and contented laughter.

"Come into the house, yuh old man-eaters," Clive finally invited. "I want yuh to meet the boss. Besides, yuh must be hongry, and Charley Long'll be tickled pink to get yuh a swell feed."

The quartet clumped across the veranda and into the living-room where Forest stood beside the re-lighted lamp.

"Miss Glade, I want yuh to meet three of the fightin'est fools that ever come out of Texas," Clive introduced the embarrassed trio. "They was all Rangers same time I was and quit 'bout the same time I did. This yere's Shad Stevens; he was a sergeant and a good one, and yere's Honey Malloy, the geezer what chased old Jeff Lorillard across the Rio Grand' and brought him back regardless of what Mexico said about it. Last, but not least, this is Bull Ellerby, my sleepin' mate in the barracks when we was to hum."

The girl's eyes gleamed happily as she shook hands with each man. Tongue-tied and embarrassed they stood before her, shifting from foot to foot, unable to say what they wanted to say, afraid to speak at all for fear they would blurt out that which they did not want to say.

After a time with the animated chatter of Clive to help them, they lost their timidity and began bandying words with each other at a fast clip.

"What's this all about, Tex?" Bull Ellerby finally turned to Clive. "Yore telygram said to come a-runnin' if we wanted

to mix in somethin' real interestin'. Well, we're here. Might as well tell us now as to hold off."

"Yeh, we're curious cusses, Tex, as yuh know," said Honey. "Loosen yore old bazoo an' elucidate."

So Clive told them. While Charley Long, making a din with his pots and pans, rustled a meal, Clive went back to the beginning of what Forest had told him and related the whole tale. At its finish Bull Ellerby brought his heavy hand thwacking against his chaparejoed thigh.

"Well, they's four of us now, ain't they?" he demanded. "What's the use of waitin' till them other hombres git here. Let's start out in the mornin' and comb this old valley like she was never combed afore. I'll bet a concho off muh Sunday chaps ag'in a gnat's whiskers that us four c'n make them buzzards git down on their hunkers and ask their Maker to he'p 'em, that's what I'll bet."

"Aw, shut up, Bull," said Honey Malloy. "You let Clive run this leetle shin-dig, and don't yuh go.a-gittin' so all-fired previous."

Bull glared at Honey, growling in his throat and hunching his massive shoulders.

"Honey, if yuh was any bigger 'n a pint of bay-rum I'd turn yuh across muh knee and spank yuh, so help me I would. As it is, yore size saves yuh," he threatened.

WITH the coming of dawn the quartet went into action, directing their initial efforts against the sheep. Clive had previously ridden all over the ranch with Forest and knew the approximate lay of the land. He had found most of her land-marks destroyed, but still he was sure enough of the limits of the ranch to feel he was on safe ground in any action he might take to establish mythical boundaries.

A two-hour ride brought them to the lip of an arroyo and they plunged down the banks. The horses waded the shallow water at the bottom and toiled up the farther bank. Then they saw the sheep.

A billowing wave of dirty gray and white spread across the grass, all fairly and squarely on Forest's property. With Clive in the lead, the four bore down on a dingy tent pitched close to a water-hole.

A squat, swarthy Mexican greeted them, a rifle in his hands.

"Whose sheep, hombre?" Clive addressed him.

The Mexican shifted his rifle.

"Eet is none of your beez-ness," he said.

With a leap Clive left his saddle and sprang upon the man. He tore the rifle from his grip and hurled it aside, the while his swinging fists beat a tattoo on the fellow's face. With a cry for mercy the Mexican sank to the sod.

"Whose sheep?"

"Ah, señor, *quién sabe?* I hire for to drive heem; you ask camp-tender."

"Where is he?"

The Mexican pointed. Following the direction indicated by the finger, Clive's glance fell upon another tent, a half mile distant. He could discern figures moving about it. Again he turned to the Mexican.

"Let me tell yuh something, *ladron;* yore days here is numbered. The best thing yuh ever done was 'fess up that yuh didn't know who owned these woolies. Now, yuh pack up yore things and get to hell out of here. If yo're here when we come back yuh'll be strung up, and that's flat. *Comprende?*"

"*Si señor,* I *comprende,* and I go," said the trembling herder.

"Number one," said Clive grimly. "Come on, cowboys. There's more game over that-away," and he led off in the direction of the other tent.

While they were still fifty yards distant the crack of a rifle sounded and a warning bullet whined over their heads.

The shot brought immediate action. With yells, the quartet drew six-guns and a peppering fusillade was turned on the tent. Four men came running from between the dirty flaps, hands thrust in the air. All were Mexicans.

"Who fired that rifle?" Clive asked belligerently as he dismounted and walked among the herders, feeling them over for hidden knives or revolvers. Finding two knives he drew them forth and hurled them far to one side. No one answered his question.

"Aw, who cares who fired the shot, Tex," said Honey Malloy. "Let's give them hombres a ride and let it go at that."

Clive looked at a tall Mexican who had the air of being in charge.

"Whose sheep?" he asked.

The man shifted uneasily and his tongue rolled out the soft patois of the country south of the Rio Grande.

"Speak American," cried Clive, "and tell us who owns them dirty sheep!"

"Meester Bender," sullenly came the answer.

"Now we know as much as we did afore," said Shad. "Make 'em git the damn things off'n here; that's the main idea, I reckon."

But Clive had a different idea.

"Not on your tintype, Shad. I knows of this Bender geezer. He owns a ranch down toward the pass. Miss Glade told me 'bout him the first day I saw her; said he might give me a job if I rode down that-a-way. So Mr. Bender owns these woolies, hey?" he said, turning to the Mexican again. "Well, I'm sorta glad to hear it. Now, yuh dang' *ladrones*, round all them dirty sheep up and get 'em started down toward Bender's."

The Mexican turned and spoke to his companions. Immediately they called to the dogs and these darted off at a swift, bounding lope, flying far around the sheep and turning them into a compact mass.

"Now, yuh know the way to Benders, I reckon," Clive said, when this was done. "Drive them woolies along. We're a-goin' right with yuh and when we reach Bender's we're a-goin' to turn that bunch of grass-killers into his alfalfy field. *Sabe?*"

Fear darted into the leader's eyes.

"Señor Bender weel rave, he—keel," he protested.

"Well, we'll rave and kill if yuh don't, old-timer, so suit yorese'f."

Ten minutes later the sheep were moving slowly down the valley, while the Mexicans struck their tents and tied them, together with their equipment, on pack horses, and followed. Clive and Bull rode ahead together, with Shad and Honey Malloy in the rear, menacing the herders.

IT WAS twelve miles from the Swinging JJ ranch-house to Bender's house, but from where the sheep had been grazing to Bender's alfalfa field was a matter of a bare six miles. Even then it required two hours of constant urging to get the animals that far.

Outside the alfalfa field, purple-green, knee-high and rich in promise of the crop it would be, Clive dropped from Thunder and pulled a pair of wire-cutters from his pocket. Five snips and five strands of barbed wire fell back, with brief, musical *pung-g-g* as they parted. Through the gap the sheep were herded.

It was a ticklish job and the soft Arizona twilight was falling over the valley, obscuring the Mogollons in shadows when the last animal was driven within. Eagerly clicking teeth and clamping jaws attested to the greed of the sheep and the thoroughness with which they were setting about the work of demolishing the alfalfa.

"Cripes," exclaimed Chad as he helped Clive refasten the wire and hide as much as possible the marks of the snippers, "I hates to see them woolies spoilin' that field, but I reckon they belong to the same man as owns the hay, and if he thought it was up to Miss Forest to feed 'em, he shore oughtn't to kick when he finds out she refused and sent 'em back to his own little pet alfalfy patch."

Honey Malloy laughed softly and Bull Ellerby grunted contentedly. They had drawn first blood in the fight they were opening and all were highly satisfied. The wire again in place and the sheep hemmed in securely, Clive turned to the waiting, fear-filled Mexicans.

"Listen, you hombres. Yo're a-goin' to ride back with us far as the road and we're a-goin' to see that yuh skedaddle out of here *pronto*. If yo're not over that pass afore midnight, every damn one o' yuh will get lead. *Sabe?*"

The frightened men understood and made no objections when Bull herded them ahead much as he might have driven so many sheep. Honey Malloy laughed gleefully.

"Oh, mama, if them woolies last in there all night what they'll do to that hay will be a shame. I'm sorry for the sheep, though; they'll shore git indigesting or somethin'. Like as not it'll kill a lot of 'em."

"Let it," said Shad sententiously, heartless wherever sheep were concerned. "L'arn 'em not to git in peoples' yards no more when they ain't wanted."

They cut straight across the range, making for the highway where it wound, a ribbon of white in the moonlight, off toward the pass.

"Now, don't none of yuh try to come back here and chin-chin with Bender, 'cause if yuh try it yuh'll shore git shot," Clive warned when they were well past the Bender place. "We're a-goin' to wait right around here until mornin' and it won't be healthy for nobody to come buzzin' down this-a-way tonight."

Not only were the Mexicans fearful of the guns of the four, but they also dreaded the wrath of Bender when the latter found his sheep in his own alfalfa field. It was

not likely they would stop their forward movements until they reached Sunset, and even then it was probable they would keep going until they came to recognized sheep country.

Feeling that a day of good work had been done in an excellent manner the party waited an hour, then turned back to the Swinging J. As they clattered into the yard a chorus of joyful yells sounded from the veranda and six leaping figures descended on them. Clive gave a whoop and left his saddle, striding among the others, giving and taking greetings and good-natured jests.

Six more of his former comrades had arrived.

"Spud Garrett, Lazy Turner, Pink Sellers, Mojave Evans, Brindle Thorp, and Piute Allen," he called their names aloud as he greeted them.

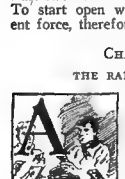
All had partaken liberally of Charley Long's bountiful offering at the table, and all had met Forest. Whoopingly they all accompanied Clive to the bunkhouse.

Before anyone turned in the new arrivals were apprised of the status of things and what Clive, Shad, Bull, and Honey had accomplished with the sheep. Clive, gazing at the nine now gathered with him in the bunkhouse, felt a swell of pride within him. They were now ten men, all told, but he knew that within the next few days they would be a score, perhaps more. He had sent thirty telegrams, but made allowances for the possibility that five, at the most, could not come.

Spud Garrett, a fiery Texan whose reputation as a six-gun artist had spread the length and breadth of the Panhandle, was for starting hostilities first thing in the morning; but cooler heads prevailed. If there was, as Forest suspected, a combination of virtually all the valley ranchers in a plot against her, they would have at least two hundred and fifty men to fight. To start open warfare with their present force, therefore, would be folly.

Chapter IV

THE RANGERS GATHER



PENNY-ANTE game in the bunkhouse was holding the attention of all the next evening when a clatter of hoofs drew Clive, Honey Malloy, and Spud Garrett outside. A beefy man with drooping mustaches had ridden into the yard on a sorrel stallion. He was accompanied by a half-dozen punchers. His face, clearly visible in the light of the moon, was a black mask of anger and his eyes gleamed savagely.

"Where's the gal that's a-runnin' this place?" he demanded.

"Who wants to know?" Clive countered, coolly. His eyes were on the riders, noting all were armed heavily and that hands were resting lightly near gun-butts.

"None of yore damn 'pertinence, cowboy," rasped the other. "I want to talk with the gal, and immedjutly, too."

"I reckon yo're talkin' to her foreman, mister, and yuh can be a-tellin' me most anything yuh got to say to her," Clive answered.

"Foreman?" yelled the other. "When'd she git a foreman? How long yuh be'n here? How many hands yuh got? I thought she was done here and was pullin' out. That's the word that went 'round the valley, leastwise."

"How do you do, Mr. Bender?"

It was Forest's voice, tinged with excitement.

The big man turned to her, watching as she stepped through the gate in the little picket fence, and out into the ranch yard. He glanced at her stormily.

"I don't do a-tall, young woman," he growled. "I come over here to ask yuh if you turned them damn sheep into my alfalfy. Did yuh?"

"Certainly not; I have hardly been out of the house for a week, Mr. Bender."

"Oh, you know what I mean. It was yore orders I reckon that turned them sheep onto me. Well, they ruined a alfalfy patch that was wo'th more'n two thousand dollars, and I'm a-goin' to make you pay. *Sabe?*" His eyes were hard in the moonlight.

"Say, you," broke in Clive, "whose sheep was they?"

Bender's eyes flicked around to Clive's, little fires gleaming in their depath.

"'Tain't a question of whose sheep they was," he rasped; "it's a question of my alfalfy field, that's what it is."

"That's where yo're wrong, mister," said Clive. "Them sheep belong to you. Well, yeste'day I went out with some fellers and we found 'em on the Swinging J and by the looks of the range they had been here some leetle time, too. We just naturally make them Mex shepherds of yoren take 'em home. Did they sick 'em onto yore alfalfy?" he ended innocently.

Bender strangled on a snort and coughed huskily.

"Did they sick 'em on my alfalfy?" he mimicked, rage blurring his voice. "Why, yuh low-down, wall-eyed——"

Spat!

Like a rifle crack came the smack of Clive's open hand across Bender's face. In the light of the brilliant moon, which made the scene almost as clear as day, Spud Garrett saw a movement of arms back among Bender's riders and, together with Honey's, his own arms moved. At the same time a yell sounded from Honey and the others, who had been listening inside the bunkhouse door, came out on the run. Revolvers gleamed in the moonlight.

"Now, if you hombres wants to start somethin', one of yuh go ahead and lift a gun, that's all!" Bull Ellerby's hoarse voice roared. "Yuh hear me, cowboys?"

It was ten to seven. Bender's men acknowledged the situation by thrusting their guns back in their holsters, but Bender, raging and cursing, swung his horse and attempted to ride Clive down. The latter calmly ducked, then leaped. His crashing fist caught Bender in the neck and the beefy form toppled from the stallion, landing with a thud and grunt on the hard-packed earth. He lay sprawled for a moment, then struggled painfully to his feet. Like his men, he now retreated.

"Yo're a-goin' to be sorry for this, cowboy; mark my words," he warned. "Yuh'll be damn glad to get out of this afore another week's gone by, and yuh can brand that on yore bunkhouse door. Come on, fellers." With a swish of his quirt he sent his stallion lunging off in the moonlight, his riders closing in an either side and accompanying him.

Out past the barn and well along toward the narrow trail that led to the valley highway little torches of light flared and a volley of shot crashed through the stillness. Clive and Forest, standing together, heard the menacing hum of bullets, droning like angry bees. The others heard them, too, and leaped to points of vantage, guns coming out and into line for action.

But there were no more shots. Evidently Bender had meant the volley as a farewell salute and a promise of dire things to come.

"Put up yore guns, fellers; they ain't really a-shootin' at us, I reckon," Clive called to his companions. "Miss Forest, if I was you, I'd get back in the house and stay there temporary like. No tellin' when a stray hunk of lead might come yore way."

Forest shook her head as though to dismiss thoughts of danger, but her face was grave.

"Mr. Morgan," she said, "you see now how desperate these men are, and how far they will go to drive me away from here. Perhaps, after all, it would be wiser for me to leave. Even if you gain a victory over them now, that does not insure my future here, for never again will there be anything except bad blood between us. Can't you see what I mean?"

"Whoop!" yelled Brindle Thorp. "If that's the case, miss, you leave them buzzards to us and we'll drive them out of the valley and yuh can have the whole dang' place all to yore lonesome."

Faintly, from far off, there came the sound of firing bursting out afresh. Scattered shots, as though six-guns were playing between forces about equal in numbers, crashed through the night. The ex-Rangers pricked up their ears.

Came a sharp, rattling outburst, then the shooting ceased and the normal silence of the valley settled down once more. Clive and Forest, with the others gathered near, stood quietly, waiting and watching, nerves tense.

AFTER a time there came out of the night a clatter of hoofs and a chorus of yells. At the first sound of the voices Clive relaxed his tension.

"That's more of my old side-kicks, Miss Forest, a-comin' on the run," he assured. "I bet they met them c'yotes of old Bender's out there some place, got tackled and shot it out with 'em."

"And I bet," came in Bull Ellerby's heavy tones, "I can tell yuh who pulled out fust."

Around the barn came plunging, foam-flecked horses, each carrying a yelling rider.

"Hey, is this the Swingin' J ranch?" a voice cried out. "If it ain't yuh better say so afore yuh start shootin' or we'll just nacherally chaw up yore danged old place."

Mojave Evans was first to respond.

"Aw, shut up, Hokum Smith; yuh always was too fresh with yore bazoo. Come on down here and I'll tan yore danged hide for yuh."

"Yipee-e-e-e! That's old Mojave Evans or I'm a pie-eyed cockroach," said the other voice.

"Hey, Tex, yuh here? What do yuh

say, old hoss? Sing out, yuh bow-laiged cattypillar; let's hear yore silvery voice," still others chimed in.

Clive turned to Forest, a grin on his face, a mist that he was not ashamed of filming his eyes.

"Hear 'em, Miss Forest? Sound kinda good to yuh? Think a bunch like that won't get back yore cows? Heck, they just be'n a-mixin' it out there with old Bender's gang, yet here they be a-yellin' and a-whoopin' just as though nothin' had happened."

"It is wonderful, such friendship," she breathed, then laughed happily.

She was close behind Clive when he started among the dismounting horde. She counted them; there were nine—nine more to augment her forces, nine more rough-riding, hard-hitting, and fearless men of the range come to take her part. Her heart swelled as she grasped the spirit of it all—the spirit of the old West that was thus being bared.

She saw Clive shaking hands, saw Shad and Honey and Spud also milling around, hands pumping; she heard prodigious clumps on the back, heard genuine affection sound in voices that cried out greetings and good cheer. Then, tears filling her eyes, a great thankfulness welling up in her heart, she turned and fled toward the house.

There Clive found her a few minutes later when he led the nine inside. She had regained her composure, save for her slightly luminous eyes, and had lighted the huge living-room lamp. Already she had spoken to Charley Long and that worthy was busy with his pots and pans, beginning now to get used to these nocturnal arrivals of Clive's friends, and glad that they were come.

"Miss Forest," said Clive proudly, "I want yuh to meet some more of my old side-kicks. They all met in Sunset, where they bought their hosses, and rode out yere together. Here, now, this windy geezer with the big nose is Hokum Smith; that long-eared ape beside him's Bing Summers, and that solemn lookin' buzzard is Jingle Jones, thinks he's a poet; and there's Brick Howard, and Chick Purdy. Behind him is Lonesome Hines, the lonesomest feller yuh ever saw. There's Wag Deering, nicknamed 'cause his tongue's always waggin', and there's Reb Sefton, whose dad fit for Lee in the Civil War, and Blaze Ormsby. Ormsby's the shinin' light of the bunch and about the slickest two-gun feller yuh ever see. Wipe yore paws now, yuh dang' apes, and greet yore new boss."

Grinning, heads ducking and feet shuffling, they crowded about and shook Forest's hand. Ormsby was the last to greet her.

"I am, indeed, glad to be here, Miss Glade," came his soft, modulated tones, no trace of the range dialect in his voice. "Clive failed to indicate that we were to work for such a charming young lady, else we would have hastened our arrival considerably."

"Hear that?" jeered Clive. "Didn't I say he was our shinin' light? But don't hold that ag'in him, Miss Forest; he don't mean nothin' by it, it's just that he can't help it."

Forest laughed tremulously. Hope, which had slowly been fanned into flame in her heart under Clive's constant optimism, now burst forth and burned high. In that instant she willingly would have gambled all her remaining dollars that these men would conquer in her name, and in conquering carve out in the Cottonwood Valley an enviable position for the Swinging J ranch.

Charley Long's singsong call reached them and the nine clumped off to a steaming meal.

"Was you fellers a-doin' some shootin' down the road a spell back?" Clive asked.

Wag raised a grinning face from a blistering hot cup of coffee.

"Did you hear that, *amigo?* Say, that was the dangdest thing yuh ever heard tell of. Here we was, all a-ridin' along easy and peaceful like and Brick, Lonesome and Blaze a-singin' some sob-song when all to onct, whang, and then crack, bang and smash! We was set on by a lot of ridin' fools who was either drunk or crazy; leastwise, they couldn't shoot straight. Well, we just nacherally lit into that gang and chased merry hell out of 'em. They was six or seven, I didn't count how many, but I know a big hombre with a black mustache was a-leadin' 'em——"

He was interrupted by hoof-beats outside and another spasm of yells. Bull Elerby's deep bass could be heard in joyous acclaim, while the softer voice of Shad Stevens also broke in.

Clive hastened outside and his eyes lit with pleasure. In the yard seven men were dismounting. Every man he had expected and had counted on as a certainty had now arrived.

"Did that other bunch of lop-ears ar-

rive?" a voice was asking. "We heard about 'em in Sunset and we rode like two kinds of hell tryin' to ketch 'em, but I reckon they was a-ridin' the same way, leastwise, we didn't git nary a sign of 'em, not even their dang' dust."

Bull Ellerby's heavy voice assured them the others had arrived top-side up and even now were being dined. Then Clive was among them. The hand-shaking and back-thumping was gone through with once more and once more Forest was called on to greet new allies.

A tall, lithe youth, with black eyes and a pale, handsome face, stood in the forefront, and toward him Clive pointed an unmannerly finger, indicating first of all the silver-mounted six-guns that swung at his hips.

"There, Miss Forest," Clive declared, "is the king-pin two-gun man of the Texas Rangers; leastwise, he was ontil he quit bein' a Ranger. Meet Two-Gun Farrell, the fastest man with a gun in the Southwest, I reckon; and standin' there beside him is his pal, Faro Latimer. There's Laramie Wilkins, Fog Carruthers, Milk River Ellis, Silk Kinksbury, and Wyomin' Red Hargrave. Now, yuh've met 'em all. Here we are, twenty-six of us, and me the porest cuss of the lot, if I do say it muhse'f. There ain't a man in the bunch that won't go the limit for yuh, Miss Forest, and when we get through with Cottonwood Valley, yuh shore won't know the old place nohow."

The reunion that followed lasted until well after midnight, and when Forest finally retired there was a great peace in her heart, and a great thankfulness; also, a feeling was being born there that was new to her, and it had to do with Clive Morgan.

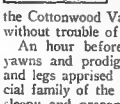
Next day Clive held a council of war at which all were present and the situation was gone over carefully.

As a starter it was decided that every head of Swinging J stock that could be found would be rounded up and brought back to the Swinging J acres. It was about time for the annual spring roundup, but no one could be sure that one would be held in Cottonwood Valley, so they determined to comb every herd in the whole region for Forest's stock. If opposition to the move cropped out, they would know how to deal with it; in fact, this was exactly what they wanted.

That evening Forest formally designated Clive as her foreman, and told him a wagon load of supplies would have to be brought in from Sunset. Bearing a sizeable check on the bank at Sunset, Clive sought the bunkhouse and appointed Silk, Fog, Laramie, and Wag as those who would hitch up the four-horse team next morning and start for town, forty miles away.

CHAPTER V

FIRE AND CONFLICT



THE day had been peaceful. Clive had rather anticipated a visit from Bender, this time with more punchers behind him, or possibly a force augmented by riders from other ranches of the Cottonwood Valley, but night came on without trouble of any sort.

An hour before midnight a series of yawns and prodigious stretches of arms and legs apprised Clive that the new official family of the Swinging J was getting sleepy and preparing to turn in, and he made a suggestion that had been in his mind all evening.

"Yuh know, fellers, things has been too peaceable to suit me, 'specially when yuh consider what's be'n a-happenin' yere and what's apt to come. Now I figgers the sensible thing for us to do is to establish a reg'lar night watch and I'm goin' to suggest that we set one tonight. Pink, yuh always was a danged old night owl, so s'posin' yuh sashay outside and find yuh'se'f a hole and keep a eye on things. If yuh think yuh'll get lonesome, yuh can take Chick with yuh to keep yuh company," he said.

Pink Sellers rose.

"Come on, Chick," he said. "You and me is designated as night riders of this yere outfit, so quit yore danged yawnin' and move along. Some day, shore as hell, yo're a-goin' to bust yore jaw gap'in' like that."

Peace still hovered over the ranch at midnight. Pink and Chick, sitting by the corral in the shadow of the fence, dozed despite their good intentions. The moon rode high in the heavens and brilliant, low-hanging stars studded the sky. It seemed that a place so quiet and serene, of sheer necessity must remain so.

About three o'clock something awakened Pink. He sniffed the air, then tugged at Chick's arm, rousing him. Excitedly, Pink put his lips to Chick's ear.

"Wake up, Chick, but keep quiet; I smells smoke, shore as hell. I reckon

they's somethin' burnin' down there by the barn. Lively, now, but for cripe's sake, we mustn't make no noise."

Silently they skirted the corral. Near the barn they dropped to their hands and knees and crept forward cautiously. Suddenly a flare of light shot up toward the rear of the structure, and Pink forthwith abandoned caution. He let out a yell and his six-gun fired three rapid shots in the air.

Three figures, running rapidly, darted from behind the barn, made their way to waiting horses and fled swiftly off into the night. But Pink had glimpsed a heavy face for just an instant as n tongue of flame, eating at a wisp of straw, had flared brightly.

"They fired the barn, old-timer, but I seen one of the geezers what done it!" Pink shouted, as Clive, with the others at his heels and only half-clad came running up.

Desperately every man of the outfit set about the task of saving the barn, but even as they made their first frantic attempts they saw it would be a hopeless endeavor. The structure had been fired in three places and the flames, billowing and waving through the dry straw piled inside, were eating their way rapidly up the walls and toward the roof.

So long as they could stand the heat they worked in relay and threw buckets of water wherever they could reach, but in ten minutes they had been driven off by the fierce blaze and stood despondently while the big barn toppled and sent up a shower of sparks that soared high toward the heavens.

Fortunately, the barn set outside the cottonwood trees and was far enough removed from the house so as not to threaten the latter structure. The bunkhouse, too, was safe. The ex-Rangers had managed to save most of the implements inside the barn and these, including the buckboard and many rolls of barbed wire, were now piled in an ungainly mass to one side. At dawn the ruins still smouldered, and where had been a giant structure only a few hours earlier there was now only a smoking ruin of charred wood and bits of iron.

Clive turned bitter eyes on Pink.

"Yuh say yuh saw one of the snakes that done this, Pink? Tell me what he looked like. I'm a-goin' through this valley till I find 'im, and then he's a-goin' to dance on air if I have to string 'im up all by muh lonesome."

Forest listened intently to Pink's reply. For hours she had stood and watched the valiant fight the men had made to save what they could.

"It was a big fellow with on'y one eye and he had somethin' wrong with one of his ears; leastwise, it didn't seem to be all there," Pink testified.

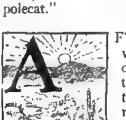
Forest drew a quick breath and Clive gave a start, then turned to the girl.

"Miss Forest," he asked, "who owns the next ranch to yuh on the no'th?"

"It's the Box O, Clive," she replied. "Jeb Horner owns it. I know what you are thinking, and I agree with you. The man Pink saw was Clem Jacobs, old Horner's foreman."

Clive nodded grimly.

"Yep, that's the buzzard, all right," he said. "He's the hombre that told me to skedaddle when I poked muh haid in there that day at dinner time a-huntin' a job. Well, I knows of a way to get that dang' polecat."



AFTER breakfast and with the burning rays of the sun pouring over the mountain peaks to the east, Silk, Fog, Laramie, and Wag went to the harness shed near the corral and brought out the equipment for the horses. Half an hour later, Silk climbed onto the high seat and picked up the reins. He already had been handed the check Forest had given Clive, and was prepared for the drive into Sunset for supplies.

Those who were to accompany him mounted their wiry cayuses and ranged alongside the wagon. Bull Ellerby, watching the proceedings, turned to Clive.

"'T ain't any of my business, maybe, Tex, but hadn't yuh ort to send a couple more fellers with them bozos?" he asked. "S'posin' eight or a dozen of them skunks that has be'n a-honin' for trouble fr'm us was to jump 'em over there in that pass?"

"I reckon yo're right, Bull," Clive answered, and he turned to the waiting group and called, "Bing, you and Brick and Reb go along with 'em and be dang' shore yuh bring back that grub top-side high."

The wagon departed with a grim escort of six riders who ached for trouble. As the outfit rattled off down the lane, Clive called the others about him and suggested they take a walk down past the ruins of the barn. Scenting something in Clive's mind, they followed him eagerly. Outside

the cottonwoods they gathered in a circle about their leader.

"I didn't want to say much where Miss Forest might accidental like have heard," Clive said, "'cause what I'm a-goin' to put up to your hombres might not set well with her. Now, listen. Pink, here, seen a one-eyed polecat with a tin ear. I know where that gopher slings his leather. To-night we're a-goin' to pay him a leetle visit. Now, gather in close while I spouts to yuh a leetle plan I got in mind."

For five minutes the low drone of Clive's voice was the only sound that broke the silence. Forest, from the veranda of the house, could see them but she could not hear what was being said. Nor, that night after midnight, did she see five silent forms steal softly from the bunkhouse, and ride easily away in the moonlight. A half mile from the house, Clive straightened in his saddle.

"We can cut loose now, boys, 'thout her hearin' our ponies. Yuh shore yuh got them matches, Two-Gun?"

"I got a whole dang' pocketful, Tex."

"Good," said Clive. "I got a supply muhse'f. Now, let's make some speed."

Out across the open range and toward the fenced in country they spurred. Another hour and they came to a line fence, the one Clive had noticed the day he met Forest. He knew it would now be less than an hour until they reached the Box O. In a little while he led the way from the highway, turning in toward the Box O fence and drawing forth his wire-snippers.

"I s'pose old Horner's got some night riders, so we got to be careful, boys," he cautioned as, wires down, they rode onto the Box O acres.

"I'd shore admire for one of 'em to try and stop us," said Two-Gun Farrell, his pale face gleaming in the moonlight, and his smooth, white fingers twitching as though eager to get at his gun-butts.

Jeb Horner had erected all his ranch buildings among cottonwood trees and an orange grove. The latter spread out in back of the barn and stalked off toward the mountains that towered to the north-east, several miles distant. This proved favorable to the night raiders, for the last ten minutes of their cautious journey was made in the shadows of these trees, only recently plucked of their ripened fruit; so recently, in fact, that golden balls still hung in odd places on the branches.

In this grove they left their horses, reins dropped over their heads. There would be no danger of them neighing, for there were five, and generally it is only when a horse is alone that it will neigh when it sights or hears another of its kind.

From shadow to shadow the five silent forms approached the giant Box O barn. Before reaching the barn itself, one shadow detached itself from the others and crept toward the harness and tool shed. Still another stepped aside and made its way to the fruit-house, where Horner sorted and graded his oranges.

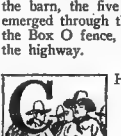
Came a quick dash across a moonlit patch, then the shadows blended with the deeper shades around the buildings.

Silent hands worked rapidly. A door in the barn was opened and three figures crept inside. Meantime, Ormsby, over at the shed, and Two-Gun, in the fruit-house, were busy. Ormsby sighted a pile of refuse in the shed, struck a match along the underside of his chaparejoed leg and cast it down among the litter of paper and shavings, while Two-Gun set a match going in a heap of soft, pitchy pine boxes. Both waited only long enough to see the flames start, then made their way hurriedly back into the orange trees.

In the barn, at three separate places, Clive, Lonesome, and Wyoming threw blazing matches into piled up straw. They had noted that no animals were inside the structure, therefore had no compunctions about what they were doing. They paused only long enough to see the flames lick swiftly across the straw, then joined Blaze and Two-Gun back at the horses.

No signs of life had shown from the ranch-house or about the bunkhouse. It was evident that old Jeb Horner, serene in the belief that all was well on his own ranch, had closed up tightly for the night. If any night riders were kept busy at all, they were somewhere off with the herds.

As the first startled yells and a few scattered shots sounded from the ranch, as the first flaring tongue of flame burst from the barn, the five from the Swinging J emerged through the gap they had cut in the Box O fence, and clattered off down the highway.



CHARLEY LONG had not finished with his breakfast dishes when a troop of riders swung into the yard of the Swinging J, a huge, one-eyed man with a mutilated ear at their head. Clive, showing no visible signs of his nocturnal activities, watched them ap-

proach, counting ten riders in all. With Two-Gun, Faro, Bull, Pink, and Blaze at his side he waited quietly as the others came up.

"That's the jasper I saw a-runnin' from our barn, Tex," Pink whispered.

Clive nodded that he understood and gave Pink a warning nudge with his elbow.

Jacobs, for it was Jeb Horner's burly foreman, reined in his pony a scant dozen feet from where Clive and his companions were standing.

"Any of you hombres out ridin' last night?" he asked, his voice razor-edged.

Clive saw the men behind Jacobs swing light hands near their gun-butts. He wiggled his fingers at Pink and the latter nonchalantly strolled off toward the bunkhouse, reading aright the old Ranger signal that Clive had given him.

"Might 'a' be'n," Clive said evenly. "Why?"

"And maybe yuh might 'a' set out barn and shed and fruit-house on fire, too, hey?" rasped Jacobs.

"Was yore barn set on fire last night?" Clive asked, his voice innocently sympathetic. "Now ain't that the dangedest thing yuh ever heard of? Our barn was burned, too; on'y, that was night afore last. Yuh reckon the same fellers could-a sot both fires?"

Jacobs's face whitened swiftly and rage flared in his narrow-set eyes.

"No, I don't reckon they could," he ground out. "I reckon the hombres what visited our place come from the Swingin' J, and I'm a-aimin' to find out for shore."

"He'p yoresе'f to the information, cowboy," said Clive. "Yo're welcome to all yuh can learn here." He waved a careless hand and spat contemptuously.

"Yuh danged whelp," roared Jacobs, "I reckon yuh had a hand in that fire last night yoresе'f, mister man. Git yore hoss and come along with us to the old man's, and see what he's got ready and waitin' for yuh."

"I reckon yo're a-referrin' to yore mangy old boss," said Clive easily. "Howsumever, if he wants to see me you tell 'em to come over this-a-way. Last time I was at yore place yuh was so danged onmannerly when I asked yuh for a job that yuh wouldn't even invite me to chuck, and I was hongry as a coyote."

"No, not the last time yuh was at our ranch, yuh pie-eyed buzzard!" yelled Jacobs. "The last time yuh was at the Box O was last night, and I reckon I can prove it," he added, triumphantly.

Clive repressed a start. He saw Jacobs's hand rising and from it dangled a *concho* from a pair of chaps; it was the exact counterpart to others that hung on Clive's legs. Somehow, it had been cut off during the previous night's affair, and Clive had not noticed it. Jacobs held out the *concho*.

"Did yuh ever see that afore?" he said.

Clive gazed at it, perfect innocence and wonder simulated in his eyes.

"Why," he cried, as though delighted that he had made a discovery. "That's my *concho*. I be'n a-missin' that ever since the day yuh told me to skedaddle off yore ranch. I'm shore glad yuh found it."

"Quit yore damn play-actin', mister. That *concho* was found out under our orange trees, and yuh wasn't near them trees the day yuh asked me for a job."

Clive decided to take Jacobs's advice. He quit his "play-actin'," but not in the manner the burly Box O foreman wished. First, he made a flying leap and retrieved the telltale *concho*.

"I ain't here to answer a lot o' damn fool questions for yuh, yuh dang' Piute," he cried, then. "Now, you herd them buzzards of yorn around and take 'em off this ranch."

As though this were a signal he had been awaiting, Jacobs's hand flashed for his gun, while behind him his men scattered and rushed. Six-shooters flared and crashed, spouting smoke and flame. Bull Ellerby grunted and sat down heavily, blood staining his shirt at his right shoulder. Faro's left arm jerked queerly, then flopped limply at his side. Clive felt a scorching sear of a bullet across his ribs and felt, too, the wind temporarily driven from his lungs.

Instantly Two-Gun Farrell was in action, gun in either hand, and they were roaring their blasts of death and destruction, blasts that annihilated whichever way they struck. Two-Gun's pale face was deathly white and in his sombre eyes were twin flames of green. A smile twisted the corners of his mouth. His guns blazed with a precision that was as deadly as it was steady.

Jacobs pitched from his saddle, striking the ground heavily, while behind him a rider went slumping across his saddle horn, a tiny blue hole growing like magic between his eyes. Just then a volley belched from the bunkhouse from the other Swinging J riders. Almost as one, three men pitched from their saddles and joined Jacobs on the ground.

Surprised by the fire from the bunk-

house and by the numbers of the punchers who had appeared from there, the Box O riders hastily put up their guns and turned to flee.

"Stay where yuh are, cowboys, or yuh'll every damn' one get lead!" Clive's voice roared. "Take yore boss and them stinkin' hawgs layin' there on the ground with yuh when yuh go, and do it *pronto*."

The Box O riders dropped from their saddles, hands held carefully away from their guns. Jacobs they found shot through each shoulder, the first victim of Two-Gun Farrell. He was unconscious. Two of the men on the ground were dead, as was also the one who still was slumped across his saddle horn. Three others were wounded.

On the other hand, Bull Ellerby would be out of commission for some time. A bullet had smashed into his right shoulder. Faro Latimer's left arm had a deep gash through the flesh below the elbow, and Milk River Ellis had a bullet in the calf of his right leg. Clive felt blood running from a sore spot on his ribs, but otherwise seemed no worse for his experience.

While Bull and Milk River were being carried into the bunkhouse, Clive watched the Box O riders tie their dead comrades onto their recent mounts; watched while they made the wounded men as comfortable as possible and started on the long ride back to the Box O.

"Now, you fellers keep goin' and don't none of yuh ever come back here," he advised. "We're a-goin' to put the Swingin' J back on its feet and from now on 'no trespassin'' is the sign over the whole dang' shebang. First man that sets foot on Swingin' J property hereafter, 'thout he's got honest business here, gets lead. Just keep that under yore hats and tell it to that old sheep-killin' dog yuh work for."

Bitter oaths and threats were hurled at him, but the Box O men were too wise to offer further show of violence. They rode, cursing, from the yard.

Chapter VI

ROUND-UP PLANS ARE LAID

CLIVE saw Forest leave the house and come toward him. Her face was white and her eyes were horror-filled, evidence enough that she had witnessed the affray in the yard. She came directly to him.

"Clive, this fighting is terrible! I cannot stand it! Some of those men were killed, and I saw two of your friends being carried into the bunkhouse, wounded. Isn't there any way to run the ranch without shooting people?" she pleaded.

"Not when said people just naturally comes a-gunnin' for yuh," he answered grimly. "I'm sorry yuh saw this leetle shindig, Miss Forest, but I reckon it can't be helped now. But don't yuh worry none. We ain't a-killin' nobody that ain't tryin' to do us first."

"Those wounded men must be cared for," she continued. "Are they hurt seriously?"

"I don't reckon they're a-goin' to die, if that's what yuh mean. Bull's hurt worse 'n anybody else. He got a bullet in the shoulder. I reckon they're fixin' him up now, and if yuh got anything in the way of clean bandages like, it would be appreciated."

Forest fled to the house, returning almost immediately with clean linen strips, iodine, and cotton.

"I don't reckon yuh can help none," Clive assured, steering her from the bunkhouse. "Blaze Ormsby's studied medicine and holds a diplomy 'long with his other accomplishments. I reckon he'll see that Bull's fixed top shape. Howsumever, if he needs yuh, I'll let yuh know *pronto*."

Forest watched Clive as he disappeared inside the bunkhouse. Her heart was torn with mixed emotions. She loathed the bloodshed and turmoil, yet she was sensible enough to realize that the fight in the yard had not been of her own outfit's choosing. The men had merely defended themselves.

It attested to their marksmanship that dead men were being taken back to the Box O, while only one badly wounded Swinging J man was in the bunkhouse. She sighed, but decided to say no more. The thing was settled so far as she was concerned; her ranch was in Clive's hands, and she would let him pursue his own methods of fighting her persecutors.

Inside the bunkhouse Bull Ellerby had been attended to first by Ormsby, while Milk River Ellis, painfully, but not seriously hurt, lay back on his bunk and allowed Jingle Jones to bathe his leg. He probably would have to keep off of his feet for some time, but otherwise was no worse for the encounter. Faro Latimer made light of the gash in his arm, permitting only that it be lightly bandaged and refusing even to place it in a sling.

"What about yorese'f, Clive? Yuh be'n a-bleedin', ain't yuh?" It was Lonesome who asked.

For the first time since that searing flame had pained him Clive remembered his own condition and hurriedly drew off his shirt. The skin was broken over his left ribs, but the bleeding had ceased and he was in no pain. He washed off the dried blood and Ormsby strapped a piece of clean linen over the wound, holding it in place with a heavy piece of adhesive plaster. Choosing fresh shirts, Clive drew them on and declared himself to be as fit as ever.

"What are we goin' to do next, Tex?" Lonesome asked. " 'Pears to me we ain't a-goin' to have a lot of peace around yere, now that the ball's started rollin'. Shore as yore gran-mammy didn't have chin-whiskers we're a-goin' to have more trouble."

"Well, we gotta take things easy till the wagon gets back with our fodder and then, with all hands on deck 'ceptin' Bull and Milk River, I don't reckon we're a-goin' to worry a lot over what happens," Clive replied.

"I bet them Box O hombres come at us right, next time," speculated Chick Purdy.

"Let 'em," snapped Clive. "I ain't a-worryin' none. First thing we ought to do now, seems to me, is to get Miss Forest's cows rounded up. Blaze, in addition to yore bein' a singer, a langwidge slinger, a gun artist and a dang' good doctor, yuh used to draw purty pictures and make little doo-dads with a pen and ink. I wonder can yuh make some signs that they's a-goin' to be a round-up. Make 'em warn everybody that we're a-goin' to stage it all by our lonesome onless the rest of the valley cares to send hands to protect its interests. I want about twenty, so's I can post 'em prominent like where every sheep-nose in the place will see 'em. Make 'em big."

"I'll be happy to oblige you, Tex," said Blaze, his soft, slow voice eager.

"Me, I'm a-tellin' yuh that what we want is to paint them signs dang good and big on boards, then nail 'em up, so's nobody can say we didn't do it proper like," said Hokum, and the others agreed at once that he was right.

As a result, about an hour later Blaze Ormsby was seated in the shade of the bunkhouse, small brush and can of black paint before him, painting letters on what once had been the tops of cases containing canned foods. Charley Long had supplied the material. When Blaze finished, after two hours of endeavor, he stood up one of the boards and the punchers stood back to admire it.

On this board, Blaze had given his artistic bent full play. Above the lettering was a remarkable likeness of a steer, on its broad flank the ranch brand, a swinging capital J. Beneath this appeared the words:

NOTICE!

THE UNDERSIGNED WILL ROUND-UP, BEGINNING AT ONCE, ALL CATTLE ON THE OPEN RANGE BEARING THE SWINGING J BRAND. IF ANY ARE INTERESTED THEY ARE HEREBY NOTIFIED TO SEND RIDERS, IN ORDER THAT ALL RANCHES MAY BE PROTECTED. IF NO HELP IS FORTHCOMING, THE UNDERSIGNED WILL CONDUCT THE ROUND-UP INDEPENDENTLY.

F. GLADE.

Lazy Turner, surveying the pictured likeness of the steer, gasped.

"Say, Blaze," he said, "what'll yuh take to draw my pitcher for me?"

Brindle Thorp let out a guffaw.

"Yuh pore shote, Blaze cain't draw no pitcher of a jackass," he jeered.

"You hombres forget art and go get yore ponies," broke in Clive. "I want yuh to come with me. Grab them boards and we'll go put 'em up. Chick, you go to the tool shed and rustle some hammers and nails. Jingle, you go tell Miss Forest what we're up to. Wyomin', you and Two-Gun and Faro will stay here at the ranch and keep yore eyes peeled. Somebody's got to keep guard here, and besides that Bull and Milk River may be a-needin' things. Everybody else will travel with me."

"Yuh figgerin' on coverin' the whole valley with these, Tex?" asked Lonesome as the party spurred away from the house.

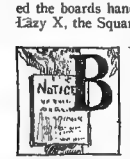
"I reckon so, Lonesome. We don't want to do nothin' that them c'yotes can say wasn't a fair shake for them. Looks like we got a lot of ridin' ahead of us, cowboys. How many signs did yuh make, Blaze?"

"Thirty, I believe.. I anticipated that you would be placarding the entire country, so I tried to make enough."

They rode rapidly, knowing the way would be far and perhaps that trouble would be met with before they were finished. The Swinging J line ended before they reached Cougar Creek and from there on Clive watched for places he thought

would be proper points to post his boards. At the ford he nailed the sign that carried the steer's likeness, fastening it to a large willow and trimming away the branches so that all who passed on the highway might see it. At the line fence, marking the northern end of the open range and the beginning of the Box O, he nailed another; then the party clattered up the road.

They passed the Box O without a pause, although all looked with interest back through the orange trees and into the clump of cottonwoods that held the ranch-house. A few derisive yells and curses greeted them, but there was no openly hostile demonstration aside from that. Their next notice was nailed to a cottonwood directly on the line fence between the Box O and the M-Bar-T, and after that they nailed the boards handy to the Dollar M, the Lazy X, the Square D, and the Crazy H.



BY NOW the day was well advanced and they had ridden nearly forty miles. Their course had taken them to the extreme northern end of the valley and they had swung back on the western side of the range. The Bar T, Diamond L, Circle C, and Benders' were yet to be taken care of, and they gave their ponies no opportunity to lag. There still remained nine signs.

They had left the Crazy H and were spurring across the Bar T when Shad Stevens rode up beside Clive.

"There's a bunch of riders comin' our way, Tex; looks like they was aimin' to pick us up," he said.

Clive drew rein and looked to his right. From the direction of the Square D came a large crowd of men on horseback. They were riding rapidly and heading directly toward the Swinging J outfit.

"We goin' to wait for 'em, Tex?" asked Honey Malloy.

"Might as well, I reckon," he answered.

A red-haired, lanky puncher with lean features and a dour face rode at the head of the oncoming men. As they drew up with the Swinging J riders, this individual advanced ahead of the others and raised his right hand in the universal peace greeting of the range-land. Clive responded in kind.

"You fellers the ones that's puttin' up them round-up notices?" the red-haired man asked.

"I reckon we are," Clive answered.

"Then I guess you're part of the bunch that's ridin' for the Swingin' J now. Don't yuh want to throw in with better outfits?" The red-haired man's tones were ingratiating.

Clive pretended to be interested, and he cast a meaning wink in the direction of Shad.

"Meanin' what?" he countered.

"Well, the Square D can use five good men and the Crazy H needs three. I onderstands the Dollar M and some of the others want top hands, too. They all pay fifty and chuck, and that's more'n you're gettin' where yuh are, I reckon."

"Yep, that's some money, all right," Clieve said. "How do yuh know we could get jobs at them places?"

"Well, I ain't sayin' how, but I know, and yuh can take my word for it that if yuh go to any of them places and let 'em know what you're after, yuh will be taken on right off. I used to work for that gal over to the Swingin' J, but she was just a jellyfish, not able to run her place. Every time somethin' happened she'd come around yowlin' for us to do somethin a'bout it and wantin' us to go out and raise merry hell. We was bein' paid to punch cows, not to fight. Then we got the same kind of a offer I'm makin' yuh now, and most of us pulled out."

"I'll think over what yuh say, cowboy," Clive informed him. "Mebbe, a little later, we'll be comin' around yere a-takin' them jobs."

"Them jobs ain't a-goin' to be open less'n yuh take 'em right away," the other rejoined.

"Then I reckon we ain't interested, not any," Clive declared.

The red-haired man showed yellow teeth in a sardonic grin.

"'Pears like it's true, then, what I heard," he observed.

"Meanin'?" querried Clive, softly.

"Meanin' you're a passel and part of them gunmen the gal brought in from Texas. Well, yuh won't git far. Yuh be'n lucky up to now, but watch you're rope, cowboy, or yuh'll find it draggin', shore as hell."

"If my rope drags, they'll be somebody fastened to t'other end of it," said Clive, easily.

"Aw, hell, Cherry," exclaimed a voice among the riders, "don't chin-chin with them hombres no longer. Come on, we got to git busy, and Spear didn't tell us to start no fannin'-bee with these geezers."

"I guess you're right, Boots," said Red-

head. "Well, s'long," he called to Clive, and turned his pony.

In a trice he was leading his party at a reckless gallop, headed toward the Bar T.

"Now, what do yuh think of that?" asked Clive of no one in particular as he watched Cherry and his companions spur off. "We're bribed to quit Miss Forest, and we're told we be'n lucky to get as far as we have. Well, come on, cowboys, we got a long ride and a lot of work to do yet."

"Hey, Tex, did yuh see that bunch o' signs some of them buzzards was a-carryin' with 'em?" asked Spud. "They was new made ones, too; I could tell by the clean boards and they was 'no trespassin'' signs."

At the line fence that separated the Crazy H and the Bar T they swung to the left, seeing an opening in the barbed wire. When they reached it, they found their way was barred by a huge notice posted on the gate:

NO TRESSPASEN

The sign was obviously meant for their benefit. Clive eyed it reflectively, then grinned.

"Saves us a heap of trouble. If they put that sign up there, it's a shore bet more people 'n us comes this-a-away, so we'll just nail one of ourn below that 'n let it go at that. We can cut across the tip o' the Box O, hit the open range, then put a sign up at the Diamond L. I reckon by then it'll be time to scoot for home. We'll ride out after supper and post old Bender's place and the circle C, and we'll put our last two signs clear over by the beginnin' o' the trail through Saddleback Pass."

The notice nailed into place, Clive led the way and they rode back to the Box O line fence. Here, Clive drew forth his wire-snippers and cut the top two strands. He and Honey Malloy repaired the damage skilfully and the party struck off toward the open range.

They rode warily, eyes and ears alert, for they knew the Box O outfit would make it hot for them if they could. However, nothing happened and late in the afternoon they came to the fences of the Diamond L. Signs were nailed here, too, and after posting their own notice, the party swung off toward home.

Crossing the ford of Cougar Creek they glanced toward the willow where the first sign had been nailed. It was still there, but had splintered from top to bottom under the crashing impact of a hundred bullets that perforated it from end to end and side to side.

"Well, I reckon somebody's shore seen it, anyways," Clive chuckled.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIGHT IN THE PASS

TWO-GUN FARREL, after supper, declared he was going out with the night party, so Clive designated Mojave Evans to remain behind and guard the ranch. Then the party, mounted on fresh horses and carrying the remainder of their signs, struck off down the road toward Saddleback Pass.

Bender's ranch, the Circle C and the Swinging J joined at the same point on the highway, with only the road itself separating the two former. The road cut the Swinging J in half from its northern to its southern sides.

At the meeting of the Swinging J and the Circle C there was a line fence; and across the road, to the right as one faced the pass, the Bender fence stalked back across the valley, Forest's property paralleling. Here, a notice was posted.

"Now, we're a-goin' on down the road, put up signs at the road leadin' to old Bender's house, and at the one that runs to the Circle C ranch-house," Clive said. "After that we want to put one at the far end of these yere ranches and take the last one to post at the valley end of the pass. I reckon that'll wind us up and we can go home and be peaceable like for the time bein'."

So it was done. As Shad drove the last nail into the last sign, a clatter of hoofs came down the steep road from the pass. Hands swinging lightly near their guns, they waited.

They could tell by the drumming of the hoofs that there was only one animal coming, a lone rider storming down out of the pass. Closely they watched to see who it would be that would burst out of the shrouding palo verde and chaparral that lined the roadside. Then the horse came in view, racing recklessly, furiously, down the hill, a rider clinging to the saddle horn and weaving from side to side as though

he were about to pitch to the ground. The moonlight struck on his face, unshielded because his hat was missing.

"That's Brick Howard, and he's be'n shot!" Shad shouted.

The others recognized Brick on the instant and spurred to meet him.

"They're after the wagon, 'bout six-eight miles back, Tex," he greeted them. "Must be twenty or more of 'em. Ambushed us. First shots brought down the hosses and knocked out Bing and Wag. I reckon Wag's daid, and I know Bing's got a busted arm and laig. Yuh'll have to hurry, cowboy. I managed to git through to ride for you hombres, and I'm Gawd-awful thankful yuh're this close. They pinked me twice, once in muh arm and once in muh laig."

Clive instantly turned in his saddle.

"Jingle, you ride back with Brick," he directed. "He mightn't make it, and yuh'll have to help 'im if he tuckers out. The rest of you buckaroos come a-runnin'!"

"Jingle, you go with 'em," Brick spoke up. "I can make it to the ranch, 'specially now that I don't have to ride so danged hard. Yuh'll be needin' 'em all to straighten that bunch out, if I tallied 'em proper."

Clive looked swiftly toward Brick, saw him straighten in his saddle, a brave smile on his face, and nodded. Then he touched his heels to his pony's side and darted forward, the others closing in behind him.

When they neared the pass, Two-Gun Farrell, his silver-mounted six-guns gleaming in the moonlight, spurred his mount viciously and ranged alongside of Clive. Blaze Ormsby followed suit and lined up on the other side of Clive; thus, the three abreast, they led the furious pace up the steep hill trail, the others following so closely that it was a miracle men and horses did not come down in a tangled, scrambled mass.

Six or eight miles, Brick had said, and a good part of the way up-hill. With Brick, Bing, and Wag out of the fight, that left only four men able to throw a gun, and Brick had said at least twenty were in the attacking party. Clive spurred his horse to greater effort and the others followed. No words were spoken and, aside from the drumming of the clattering hoofs, the only sound was the heavy breathing of the laboring animals.

On and on they rode. The crest of the pass was reached and the road became fairly level, dipping at intervals, raising at others, but on the whole fairly easy to travel. After a time the sound of shooting reached them, and Clive drew his winded pony to a slower pace, raising a hand.

"Easy, boys," he called. "If they's twenty of 'em, we got to sorta su'prise 'em. Like as not they'll be a-bushwhackin' from behind boulders and they's no use in us rushin' 'em and lettin' 'em pulverize us. From here on we go easy like, and when we get closer we leave the hosses, circle back from the road and come down on them skunks like a stampede."

There was wisdom in his plan. The horses, welcoming the easing from the strain of the long, hard ride, went forward at a steady, moderate pace. The sounds of shooting grew louder and seemed to come from a point to their right. They sensed that the road turned near here, passing around an out-jutting ridge, and that just across this they probably would find the wagon.

Clive drew rein and dismounted, tossing the reins across his horse's head and allowing them to drag on the ground. The others did likewise and the horses stood silently, heads down, nostrils flaring as they struggled to recoup from the terrific ride through the pass.

IT IS no easy task to climb a rough, treacherous Arizona hillside in the high-heeled boots of the cow country, but the Swinging J riders did it, wincing at the outrage to their sensitive feet. From the crest of the ridge they saw their wagon clearly revealed by the moonlight in the road below them, perhaps five hundred feet away.

The horses were lying dead in the traces. From both sides of the defile came little flashes of light and the cracking pops of six-guns, mingled with an occasional spiteful, whiplike spang of a rifle. The air was pungent with the acrid smell of burned powder. Clive scanned the wagon closely for signs of life and wondered where its defenders were hiding. A rattling volley told him. His men were inside, using the boxed and baled goods as a rampart, and were firing at the flashes on the hillside. Two or three silent forms, sprawled in the moonlight, indicated that a rush had been made on the wagon with fatal results, and that the attackers had decided on a long-distance battle. Clive laid his plans carefully, with the aid of Two-Gun Farrell and Blaze Ormsby.

"You and Shad take six men, go back along the point, cross the road and work in back of them hombres across there," Clive whispered to Ormsby. "We'll wait here gettin' our men spotted and we'll not move till yo're ready. When yuh get set, let 'er rip and with yore first shot we'll pile hell-bent down outa here and take these galoots from this side. We'll smash 'em *pronto* if we handle it right."

He watched silently as Blaze Shad and the others crawled off, careful to keep clumps of sage and boulders between them and the unsuspecting enemy. Clive and those with him worked a careful way down the ridge all watching the pin-points of light that flared in the shadows picking their men. Two-Gun Farrell stayed close to Clive until a blot behind a boulder attracted their attention and Clive put a warning hand on Two-Gun's arm. The latter stopped his stealthy crawl and remained silent waiting tensely.

Creeping carefully, Clive came up behind the shadow under the lee of the boulder and his gun-barrel made a flashing arc in the moonlight. It crashed down upon a high-crowned sombrero and the wearer promptly crumpled up and flattened out in the sand. Clive bent over him, turning the man on his back. A red thatch and a lean, hawk-like face, eyes closed, stared up at him. It was Cherry of the Square D. Clive put his hand over the man's heart and felt it pulsing feebly. Cherry was knocked out, but he had not been killed.

Two-Gun joined Clive and together they yanked off Cherry's shirt and bound the man's hands and feet with strips taken from it. From the dirty bandanna that swung at Cherry's neck they made a gag, and then left the sorrel-thatched one trussed like a fowl behind the boulder.

The gun-fire was now all around and below them. They were in the rear ranks of the force which was attacking from this side of the road.

"What's the matter, Cherry? Yore lead all gone?" a voice suddenly called.

Clive realized that the absence of firing from the boulder which sheltered Cherry had been noticed.

He thrust his own six-gun over the boulder, held it high and aimed at a flash of light on the opposite slope. He pulled the trigger and almost immediately an answering volley lit up the sides of the wagon. A yell sounded from across the road and a man rose from beside a boulder, spinning briefly before he pitched forward on his face. Clive's bullet had gone home under cover of the fire from the wagon.

He wondered how soon Blaze would open the counter-attack, and his fingers were itching to pull his six-gun on the shadows all about him. Across the road a rattling volley suddenly opened up.

"Yipee-e-e-e!" It was the battle cry of the range-land that sounded from the farther slope. "Yipee-e-e-e!"

It was Blaze Ormsby's voice, and at the first crash of his shots panic broke loose across the road. Men rose from behind boulders, seeking to protect themselves against this surprise attack from the rear. Clive saw the hidden marksmen about him rising and making ready to charge to the aid of their comrades. He raised his own voice:

"Yipee-e-e-e! Let 'em have it, cowboys! Kill the damn rattlers and chop off their tails. Yipee-e-e!"

He heard a roar beside him and saw Two-Gun Farrell standing beside a boulder, firing with cool deliberation and deadly aim across the scarred surface of the rock. A man dropped with every shot. On all sides guns were exploding while shrill yells of fear and rage reechoed through the pass. Clive realized for the first time that he was pulling the trigger of his own six-gun, and cursed when the hammer fell on an empty shell. Cherry's gun was in his other hand and he lifted it, continuing to pour lead toward every flitting shadow.

"You in the wagon, there, give 'em hell!" he yelled. "We're all here, cowboy!"

"Give 'em hell yorese'f, Clive; we be'n a-handin' it to 'em for hours!" Fog Carruthers's voice roared from the beleagured wagon.

Men were now running from behind boulders, cactus clumps and palo verde bushes, making for the road A yell and a clattering of hoofs sounded up the road and around the point came more than a score of horses, plunging madly. Two had burning pieces of paper attached to their flaring tails.

"Yipee-e-e-e!" It was Honey Malloy's voice. "Watch 'em run, cowboy! Let's see them skunks git away from us now. There go their hosses."

Curses and angry cries followed.

"Quit shootin' and git over the hill," a voice shouted from among the boulders. "Every man watch hisself and make yore way out of here damn fast. Keep close to me and we can stand off these hombres; they must be fifty of 'em."

Clive let out a derisive yell when he

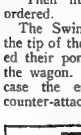
heard the fear-note in the voice. His voice was drowned in a fresh outburst of firing.

Fog Carruthers stood up on the high seat of the wagon and calmly dropped as many men as he could before they vanished among the boulders high up the ridges. Two-Gun Farrell, standing on a high rock, his deadly six-guns working with a certainty of aim that was astounding and disheartening to their enemies, also was picking off the fleeing raiders.

"They've cleared out," Ormsby finally yelled.

"Then make for the horses," Clive ordered.

The Swinging J riders converged on the tip of the point, rounded it and mounted their ponies, spurring rapidly back to the wagon. A guard was thrown out in case the enemy attempted a surprise counter-attack.



OG CARRUTHERS, standing in the road beside the wagon, grinned and greeted them as they showed up.

"Say," he asked, "how in blazes did you fellers git here so quick? 'Twasn't no time after Brick said he was a-goin' for yuh till I heard yuh shootin' and yellin' like a bunch of locoed Apaches. He must 'a' rode like a streak of greased lightning."

"We met him 'bout six miles back, where we were a-doin' some work," Clive explained briefly. "He said Wag was daid, Fog. What's yore damage total?"

Fog's face turned melancholy on the instant and his mouth drooped.

"Yep, Wag's daid, I reckon, Clive," he answered sorrowfully. "Bing's got it bad in the arm and laig; both busted, seems like. Silk Kingsbury's got a bullet in his shoulder and Laramie cain't talk. Reb was shot in the laig. I reckon I'm the on'y one that wasn't knocked out. I was drivin', yuh see, and when that first volley let go from the rocks and bushes I just dropped the lines and gave muhse'f one Gawd-awful heave backward and went plunk in among them groceries and things; then I begun to shoot from behind a pile of canned peas. The other fellers that could move managed to git inside the wagon and them as could shoot he'ped me stand off them buzzards. I shore thought we was goners, though, for a fac' I did."

Swiftly they set to work. Wag Deering, lovable, talkative Wag, was lying in the shadow of the wagon. Two bullets had struck him in the head and he had died instantly, according to Ormsby. In the wagon they found the others, with makeshift bandages already applied, grinning cheerfully. That is, all were grinning who could. Laramie Wilkins had received a bullet in his left cheek which had passed out the opposite side of his face, taking several teeth with it. His was a painful, but not serious wound. Bing, his left leg and arm limp and helpless, was the most seriously hurt. Silk's wound was high enough on the shoulder not to be dangerous, but the bone had been shattered and he was suffering agony.

Ormsby knelt inside the wagon where the cased-goods had been pushed aside in order that a place could be made for the injured. Hastily, but carefully, he examined them all.

"These temporary bandages will have to do until we get back to the ranch, boys," he announced. "I have my instruments there, you know, and I think I can get them started back to Wellville once I have them in their bunks and where I can watch them."

Blaze stayed inside with the wounded. The others attached lariats to the wagon and put harness from two dead horses on a wheel team. With eight cow ponies dragging on the lariats and Lonesome Hines at the brake, the cavalcade started. An advance guard preceded it and two men rode considerably to the rear. They did not intend to be taken by surprise, though none felt there was much danger from this source.

Hours later they arrived at the ranch, worn and weary. Wag Deering's body was carried inside and laid tenderly in a bunk. Brick Howard occupied another, swathed in makeshift bandages and endeavoring to be cheerful.

It was then that Blaze Ormsby demonstrated that the country lost a skilled physician when he decided he preferred the life of the range to that of a doctor. With painstaking care and skillful touch he probed, sterilized, and bandaged wounds. While he was about it, he re-dressed Bull Ellerby's hurts, noting with satisfaction that the latter was coming around nicely.

"Now I want five of you fellers to go outside and keep watch," Clive directed, when Blaze finally finished with his task. "Ride off a ways from the house and hide yoreselves and stay where yuh can see all approaches. Stay there till mornin' for

there's no tellin' what them polecats may do. We scotched some of 'em in the pass and when the survivors reaches home I reckon they'll just naturally get ready to come over yere and chaw us up."

A knock came at the bunkhouse door and Forest put her head inside. Clive walked over and led her into the yard. She turned to him with worried eyes and melancholy face.

"Clive, I saw men being carried into the bunkhouse and one of them, I know, was dead. It is horrible. If men must be killed for my ranch—I think I'd rather leave Cottonwood Valley."

"Miss Forest," said Clive, soberly, "there was a fight in Saddleback Pass tonight, shore enough, and they began it by bushwhacking pore old Wag Deering."

There were tears in Clive's eyes, the tears of a strong man deeply touched, and impulsively Forest reached out and clasped his hands within her own.

"I'm so sorry, Clive," she whispered, her own eyes moist, "but now that sorrow has come home so closely to you, don't you think it better for us to stop than to continue fighting?"

Still holding his hands, she waited for his reply. He winked rapidly several times; then his voice came full and firm.

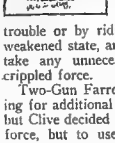
"Miss Forest, if that was my own brother layin' in there 'stead of pore old Wag, I'd be just as dead set on wipin' out them skunks," he said determinedly. "His death don't change things any. We got to show these hombres they can't boss this valley. I reckon they found that out tonight in the pass. I don't know how many we got, but if I was to guess, I'd say a-plenty. Yuh lost four good horses, I reckon; and most of them tinned things has got punctures that let the juice run out, but in the end all them losses will be cheap, for we're a-goin' to get yore ranch back, and clean out every low-down whelp in this valley."

Next day a guard was maintained, but things remained peaceful and on the day following they held Wag's funeral. Wag had never owned to a home so they made him a grave in the prettiest spot they could find, beneath a huge cottonwood and only a short distance from a spring that made that particular part of the ranch a veritable oasis.

As they walked back to the house, new lines had come into their faces and sorrow was heavy on their hearts. Even Forest found herself grimly hating those who were responsible for Deering's death; she found herself praying silently that Clive and his hard-riding companions would be able to wipe out the killers and rustlers who infested this valley of strife.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ROUND-UP



WITH eight men on the hospital list Clive decided that for the time being their activities would be confined to business near the ranch-house. There was nothing to gain by courting trouble or by riding far in their present weakened state, and he did not propose to take any unnecessary chances with his crippled force.

Two-Gun Farrell was in favor of sending for additional men to strengthen them, but Clive decided finally not to increase his force, but to use the interval while the wounded recovered to round up Forest's strayed cattle.

Taking into consideration the huge numbers of steers that were grazing on the open range, this would be an enormous task, and one that would be worthy of ten times their number; but it had to be done, so he gave the necessary orders. For a week they were busy on the construction of a counting chute; then the actual work of the round-up got under way.

Blaze Ormsby, Jingle Jones, and Lonesome remained at the ranch-house, to care for the wounded and act as a guard. The others followed Clive and set out to handle the task cut out for them as best they could. From thousands of steers on the range Forest's animals had to be cut out, banded together, and tallied.

Day after day, from sunrise until dark, the work went on. By the end of the second week the riders had become lean of body, and their eyes showed the strain of long hours in the saddle. Their ears ached from the constant thunder of bellowing steers and from the never-ending clump of thousands of hoofs. At the end of the third week they felt their work was nearing a successful conclusion.

By this time Faro Latimer's arm was healed and Milk River Ellis was back on his feet; also Silk Kingsbury, his face showing wicked scars on either cheek, was in the saddle again. Bull Ellerby and Bing Summers, the two who had been most seriously wounded, were improved so much that they no longer lay in their bunks, but

riding was still out of the question for them.

Brick, Laramie, and Wyoming Red would be available in another week. All missed Wag Deering, and his name was frequently mentioned. At such times a tensing of faces and a frosty glinting of eyes testified that Wag's death was not forgotten, nor plans for further vengeance cast aside.

The middle of the fourth week saw a score of strange riders cross the range and lope up to the great cattle herds, where the work of tallying and cutting out the Swinging J stock was drawing near an end. A lanky cowboy who introduced himself as Monte McCourt of the Lazy X, led the outfit. He asked Clive how the work was coming along.

"Fair to middlin'," Clive answered. "I reckon, though, another week or so will see us finished."

"Findin' many Lazy X cows, pard?" continued Monte.

"Quite a few, I reckon."

"Yo're tallyin' 'em, ain't yuh?"

Clive glared resentfully.

"Say, Mr. Monte, what do yuh think we are? You reckon we're a-keepin' tabs on all these cows for you hombres when yuh wouldn't send no help over this-a-way after we put up them notices?"

"We'd no help to spare this time o' year," McCourt argued. "'Tain't round-up time. Everybody at a round-up helps to tally the other fellers' stock. We nacherally s'posed yuh was doin' the same this time, and I just rode over to git a leetle information. Our ranch is the last one in the valley as yuh go north, clear over ag'in the Mogollons, and we're a leetle short-handed. We thought yuh'd shore be accommodatin' enough to keep tabs for us."

"Then yuh got another think comin'. We be'n a-tallyin' Swingin' J cows and lettin' the rest go as is."

"I never heard of a round-up bein' conducted in no such fool way," insisted Monte. "Yuh orta know ezackly how many cows of each brand yuh've handled."

"Listen here, McCourt, you got twenty men there. If you fellers want to pitch in and help us with the rest of these cows yo're welcome, and yuh can tally yore damn heads off. Far as we're concerned, we ain't tallyin' nothin' but our own animals, and that's that. If yuh'd come at the start and some of them other outfits had sent men, this thing would've be'n over two weeks ago and yuh'd all know how many steers yuh got out here. As it is, I reckon yuh'll have to stage a round-up of yore own, same as we did."

"How'd we know yuh wasn't goin' to tally everythin'?" cried Monte.

Clive snorted.

"Yuh shore got yo're nerve, I'd tell a man, 'spectin' us to do all the work while you hombres hung back and spent yore time a-figgerin' how yuh could waylay more of our wagons or burn more of our buildin's or turn more sheep on us. Hell of a way to do, is what I mean."

"Now, look-a here, Morgan; they wasn't none of the Lazy X in that shindig at the pass, and they wasn't none of the Lazy X burned yore barn. I don't reckon yuh ever saw any of this outfit mixed up in anythin' that wasn't strickly accordin' to Hoyle, and I don't like yore danged insinooations."

"Yuh can like 'em or leave 'em alone; it don't make no difference to me," said Clive with finality, his eyes wary and sweeping over the riders who were assembled behind McCourt.

"I reckon we ain't a-goin' to fight about it, Morgan," the latter conciliated, "cause if my bunch here ever mixed with yore gang, yuh would soon find yuh wasn't fightin' no such dang' sheep-chasers as them yuh met in the pass, I'm a-tellin' yuh."

"Interestin', if true," said Clive sarcastically, "but I ain't aimin' for fight if you ain't. Me, I'm plumb peaceable like as a rule, but when some polecat jumps me, they's liable to be fireworks pop right sudden."

"I reckon," said McCourt calmly, "that yuh got the idee the Lazy X is mixed up with old Bender and Horner and them Square D bozos. Well, yuh can revise yore opinion 'cause we're a-tootin' our own horns. I reckon we've had as many fights with them geezers as you have, and then some. That's one reason we come over yere today. We though maybe we could help yuh some, but since yuh ain't be'n a-keepin' no tallies 'cept on yore own stock, I reckon we'll have to start the whole shebang all over again."

Clive looked at Monte suspiciously. The latter was a clean looking, alert, clear-eyed man, and those who rode with him were happy-go-lucky, carefree-looking chaps who did not in the least give the impression that they would wage an underhanded war on a woman. But Clive was taking no chances; he could not afford to be lured into a false sense of security be-

cause a few range riders looked honest.

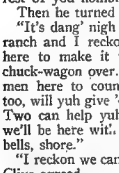
"Well, if you geezers want to tally yore cows, I reckon yo're welcome to start, far as we're concerned," he said. "Yuh can start some tally-men right now and then go after them cows we've finished with. We'll give yuh any help we can, now that yo're here, and yo're welcome to our countin' pen. Our help might be considerable, at that, seein' as we're just about through tallyin' the Swingin' J stock, also seein' as they ain't many of our cows to count."

"Hey, Chuck, you and Digger and Frog and Sleepy come yere and range up on that tally platform and keep tab on all the Lazy X and Swingin' J cows yuh see," Monte called, turning in his saddle. "The rest of you hombres stay with me."

Then he turned back to Clive.

"It's dang' nigh onto thirty miles to our ranch and I reckon we got enough work here to make it worth while bringin' a chuck-wagon over. If I leaves these four men here to count and help you fellers, too, will yuh give 'em chuck till tomorrow? Two can help yuh ride herd tonight and we'll be here with our whole outfit by ten bells, shore."

"I reckon we can 'commodate yore men," Clive agreed.



T TWILIGHT Clive called a halt, leaving the customary number of riders with the herd to await the coming of those who would stand watch during the night. Chuck and Digger had been designated by Monte as the ones who were to help night ride for the Lazy X; Frog and Sleepy rode with the others to the Swinging J bunkhouse. They turned out to be genial, wholesome chaps and very soon were on good terms with Clive and his riders.

"What I can't onderstand," said Shad to Sleepy as they rode along, "is why you birds didn't show up three weeks ago and help us from the very start of things."

"We wasn't figgerin' on pokin' our noses into no range war, that's why," said Sleepy. "We was given the impression that about the time you fellers got things purty well in hand there would be a night raid and yore herds would be scattered and all mixed up ag'in. We knowed that would prob'ly mean a fight and we wasn't goin' to horn into somethin' we could just as easy stay out of."

Clive, who was riding with them, perked up his ears.

"Where'd yuh get that idee, Sleepy?" he asked.

"Cain't say," the Lazy X rider rejoined. "It was the general impression we all got, though. I reckon it was from somethin' a bunch of Bar T and Square D buzzards said when yuh first was stickin' up them round-up notices."

"They was plannin' to stampede us, was they?" Clive mused. "Wonder what made 'em change their minds?"

"I reckon they got word to call off the gunplay and use a leetle more dee-plomacy," Sleepy opined.

Clive grunted.

"Now, what in hell do yuh mean by that?" he demanded.

"They prob'ly figgered they was more ways of gittin' yu short-horns outa here than killin' yuh," Frog, who had been riding with them, chimed in. "Yuh don't see them big geezers goin' round a-shootin' at each other, do yuh? And they round up all the dough, don't they? Hunh, them fellers uses dee-plomacy, yuh betcha. Well, I figger, and so does the rest of our bunch, that them Chicawgo cow barons has passed the word that yo're to be gently discouraged in yore noble endeavors here, as it were, but that they's to be no more gunnin' for yuh."

"Yuh talk like a law feller," said Shad. "What do yuh mean about them Chicawgo cow barons?"

"That's what I want to know," said Clive.

"Didn't anybody tell yuh they controls this valley?" asked Sleepy, surprise tinging his voice.

"How control it?" Clive wanted to know.

"Why, they owns seven of these yere valley ranches, I reckon, and what they says goes, too, yuh betcha. That's why we ain't be'n a-hornin' into things. We ain't goin' to fight no Chicawgo beef-buyers and shut off our market, not if we knows what we're a-doin', we ain't. I reckon yore ranch, the Lazy X and the Circle C are the on'y ones in the Cottonwood that ain't owned outright or controlled all the way through by them Chicawgo buzzards."

Clive whistled tunefully. Here was news indeed.

"Who are the Chicawgo geezers yuh refers to, Sleepy?" he questioned further.

Sleepy gazed at him pityingly.

"Ain't yuh never heard of the Henley Cattle & Sales Company?"

Clive whistled. The Henley people were a gigantic commission sales firm that did business all over the country, acting for any big packing interest that would patronize it. They usually bought steers on the hoof at their point of origin, shipped them to Chicago and then turned them over to the big packers, charging a stated commission for their services. He did not know they were raising cattle on their own initiative, nor that they owned or controlled any ranches.

"I knows of 'em, all right," he acknowledged. "But I thought they only acted as commission men."

"That's all they're supposed to be doin'," Sleepy agreed, "but they must 'a' be'n branchin' out to beat the cards these last few years. I reckon if them big packers what patronizes 'em knowed what Henley was a-doin' here in this valley they'd shut down on 'em dang' quick."

"Elucidate some more," urged Clive.

"There ain't much more I can tell," Sleepy responded. "I knows, though, or leastwise everybody in our outfit onderstands, that the Henley people have either bought, leased or taken options on every dang' ranch in the Cottonwood 'ceptin' the three we already mentioned. They are raisin' their own cows and makin' bigger profits that-a-way. They tried to gobble in the Lazy X, but old Simmons, who owns it, wouldn't sell. Then they said they wouldn't buy his cows and we went through a sorta range war, but finally started stickin' to our own little bailiwick and then the trouble stopped. They never did buy no more of our cows. Old Simmons sends all his stock out through the north pass and up to the loadin' pens on the Santy Fay, and now he's shippin' 'em direct on his own hook. He don't make as much money by about five per cent., he says, but I reckon he'd rather make less quick cash and keep his ranch, at that."

"That information shore puts a different face on things yereabouts," said Clive seriously. "I be'n thinkin' all the time that it was mighty funny these buzzards here in the valley would raise so much hell over Miss Glade a-steppin' in and raisin' cows. So the Henley crowd is after her, hey? Now, I wonder if a leetle telygram to some of the big packers would help things?"

"None whatever," said Frog. "Yuh couldn't prove nothin' ag'in the Henley firm. Old Simmons tried that and the biggest house in Chicawgo sent a agent down to the county seat at Sunset. He looked up records and deeds and mortgages and suchlike, but they wasn't nothin' to indycate old Horner don't own the Box O, Jeb Griffs the Square D, and so on. But I betcha that old Henley hisself is holdin' unrecorded deeds and leases and other agreements and such just the same. That agent come right here into this valley, too, and the old man gave him a earful; howsumever, a earful ain't a eyeful and what them agents want is to be showed, that's all. Every dang' one of 'em was borned, raised and eddycated in Missouri, I reckon."

Clive scowled thoughtfully.

"Well," he said, after a time, "I'm shore thankful if they are a-goin' to ease up on the gunplay. Me, I've had enough to do me the rest of muh natural borned days. But somebody's a-goin' to pay for killin' pore old Wag Deering. I hope I finds out what buzzards fired the shots that killed 'im that's all."

THE peace that had descended on the valley after the fight in the pass seemed destined to continue, but, although there was no visible signs of conflict, Clive felt they were living in a state of false security. There was tenseness and mystery in the air.

Clive could now understand why strife filled the valley. If the Henley people were doing as Frog and Sleepy had said, it meant the firm was building future business, against the possibility of losing the trade of the big packers, by controlling a strip of the range.

Cottonwood Valley was rich and fertile. Nowhere was the location more suitable for cattle raising, and if the Henley company could acquire absolute control over it, they would have a range free from the menace of drouth and scarcity of feed. In times when the remainder of the Southwest suffered from these periodical calamities, Henley would be in a position to reap rich profits on the fat and healthy steers he would be able to supply for the Eastern markets.

Clive knew that an unscrupulous concern, with a dignified name and a successful Eastern organization, could carry on shady transactions in a remote frontier country like this, and none might ever be the wiser. Arizona was a comparatively little known territory with a population of less than one hundred and fifty thousand. The law was coming, but its progress

was slow and those appointed to represent it were not adequate in numbers to safeguard the entire territory. The only way to fight the Henley crowd, therefore, was with its own tactics: fight fire with fire.

The round-up went along peaceably and in due time the Swinging J stock was cut out from the others, while the Lazy X riders had an accurate tally of their animals. Monte and his outfit had worked side by side with the Swinging J riders and Clive found that he liked the elongated foreman more and more as time passed. The feeling between them was common, it seemed, for when the time came for the Lazy X riders to return to their ranch, Monte drew Clive to one side.

"Listen, Tex; we got stric' orders from old Simmons to pull our leather at the first signs of trouble," he said, "but that don't suit none of us hombres a leetle bit, 'specially since we've seen what yore boss is up ag'in. Now, if them shad-bellied shotes starts anything more and yuh need help, just pass the word along, will yuh? We'll come a-hootin' if it means every mother's son of us gits fired the next minute. What say, cowboy?"

"I say thanks, pard, and many of 'em," said Clive, touched visibly and pumping the other's hand. "Yuh can bet yore best Sunday pants that if we run into any trouble we can't handle all by our lonesome, we'll shore shoot a rider hot on yore trail."

The round-up had revealed that Forest had sixteen hundred steers remaining. Originally she had owned thirty-six hundred, which meant that two thousand of her animals had been stolen or otherwise disposed of. She had calculated roughly that five hundred had died at the poisoned water-holes, but, even so, there were fifteen hundred or more that must be accounted for, and Clive intended that an accounting should be had, although just how or when he could not say.

By now the wounded men had recovered and were back in the saddle. The long, hot Arizona summer came on full blast and had it not been for the everflowing stream of Cougar Creek the valley grass would have dried out and burned away before July was fairly under way. The elaborate natural irrigation system of the valley, however, effectually did away with any danger of this sort, and while other sections were reporting the dryest range in ten years, Cottonwood Valley bloomed and throve and its cattle were fat and contented.

The summer passed and September came on, fully as hot as July. All had grown into a perpetually cheerful frame of mind and danger seemed more remote than at any time since they had come to the Swinging J. Only the memory of Wag Deering marred their happiness.

Under Clive's direction, a line fence had been run the entire length of the ranch from the western end of the valley to the Diamond L, and Forest's cattle were kept as closely as possible on her own lands at all times. A huge section to the south was still without fence and it was that gap that resulted in their next calamity.

CHAPTER IX

TROUBLE

THAT some new deviltry was brewing was hinted to Clive one day while he and Forest were riding across the range. Both had been eying the grazing herds, and both sought to account for an intangible something that seemed wrong. Finally, Clive got it. Pinching out the hot end of a cigarette, he turned to the girl.

"Miss Forest, I wonder if yuh see what I see?" he asked.

"I rather imagine I do, Clive," she replied. "The herds are smaller, as though large numbers had been pulled off the range."

"Ezackly," he answered. "There ain't much more'n half as many steers out here as there was a month ago. I wonder what's up now?"

"Perhaps they have sold off some of the stock," she suggested.

Clive shook his head.

"Nope, I don't reckon that's it. Winter's the porest time of year to sell steers to the Eastern packers, 'cause yuh can't ship with no degree of success. The markets right now ain't one-two with what they'll be next spring. I reckon this means they're a-schemin' up somethin' new."

"At any rate," she said, "they can't do us any harm by withdrawing their herds from the range."

"But it ain't natural, Miss Forest, for 'em to do that. Most of them ranches has got too many cows on 'em now for proper feedin', and I don't reckon they'd be puttin' all this surplus under fence 'thout they had somethin' ornery in mind. Danged if they didn't git plumb away with a round-

up 'thout us gettin' any wind of it, too."

A week later Clive, Shad, Bull Ellerby, and Honey Malloy rode across the range and Clive was struck by further reductions in the grazing herds. They spent the better part of the day riding through the steers and kept watchful eyes on the various brands they saw.

"The only cows left out there, it 'pears to me, is Swingin' J, Circle C and lazy X," Bull voiced a thought that was in the mind of each as they turned homeward late in the afternoon. "I wonder what's become of all them other brands?"

The following day they rode through the valley. The Box O ranch was the first to the north along the highway, and they chose it for their initial investigation. They found the undulating acres of Jeb Horner's place dotted thickly with cattle, too thickly for economy or best range feeding. At the Dollar M, the Square D, the M. T. and the Bar-T the same condition prevailed. Swinging back across the range they circled and passed the line fence of the Diamond L, riding along it for miles. Like the other ranches, the Diamond L acres were overpopulated with steers.

Clive scratched his head, a puzzled expression on his face.

Next day he sent Two-Gun, Pink Sellers and Jingle Jones to the Lazy X to ascertain if word of the changed range conditions had reached old Simmons, while, unaccompanied, he rode to the Circle C to question Bud Hart, its owner. As he came to the intersection of Hart's ranch with the Swinging J and Bender's place he saw that the latter, too, was swarming with cattle. Setting his teeth on the puzzle and scenting a brooding menace in the very air, he swung into the road that led to the Circle C ranch yard.

He found Bud Hart at the corral, doctoring a horse that had fallen and sprained its leg.

"Howdy, Hart," he said, swinging easily from his saddle and approaching to where the cattleman had just finished aplying a strong liniment to the injured leg.

"Same to you, Morgan," rejoined Hart.

"How's tricks?" Clive continued.

"This darned hoss stepped in a pin-dog hole and sprained his leg. I reckon everything else is all right. Why?"

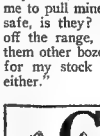
"Yuh be'n over on the range lately?"

"Nope," Bert answered, shaking his head. "Can't say as I have. I don't usually pull muh cows off there till later. Why?"

"Well," said Clive, rolling a cigarette., "I see yore cows, ours and old Simmons' is the only ones left in the lush grass. Everybody else has pulled their stock and put 'em under fence. See anything queer about that?"

Hart scratched his head with a tentative finger, then rolled a brown-paper cigarette for himself.

"Well," he concluded, "I don't know why they've yanked their steers, but if they have, then I reckon it's time for me to pull mine, too. Nothin' like playin' safe, is they? Yuh'd better yank yore'n off the range, too. If it ain't good for them other bozos, I don't reckon it's good for my stock to hang 'round out there either."



CLIVE left the Circle C as puzzed as ever and late in the afternoon, when Two-Gun, Pink and Jingle returned from the Lazy X, he was no nearer a solution.

Monte McCourt, Sleepy and Frog accompanied the Swinging J riders back to the ranch.

"Say, Tex, I come over to see how about yuh rentin' us some of yore pasture," Monte, greeted, swinging lightly from his saddle.

"Meanin' what?" asked Clive.

"Well, yuh see, soon as old Simmons heard them birds was yankin' their stock from the range, he said they was up to some devilment and that he didn't want to be caught with his guns a-hangin' on a nail, so's to speak. He says yuh got plenty of grazin' land over yere, an' he wants to pull his stock off the range. 'Course he'll pay yuh for the 'commodation."

"I reckon we can take care of yuh, all right," Clive agreed. "Yuh can arrange with Miss Forest about the pay. I see Bud Hart is a-goin' to pull his stock back to the Circle C, too, so I s'pose if that's the way the rest of you hombres look at it, then we might as well get them Swingin' J steers back here in their own yard, too."

"Well, that's that," said Monte, relief in his voice. "Frog, you ride back to the ranch and tell the old man Tex says everything's O. K., and to send along them riders. Me and Sleepy'll stay here and start gettin' our cows over this-a-way."

Next day the work of driving the stock in from the open range got under way. Simmons sent ten riders to handle his drove while Bud Hart had his entire force of fifteen men on the job. Clive, having by far the smaller number to handle, used only six men. Essentially, a new round-up was staged, for it was necessary to cut out the Circle C stock from the others. Clive still wondered how he had missed the other and larger round-up that must have been staged when the valley ranchers pulled their stock and put them under fence.

By nightfall the first drove of Swinging J and Lazy X cattle was back at the ranch, while a great drove of Circle C steers was shunted across the tip of Forest's property and driven down to Bud Hart's fence. Night riders took up their lonely vigils, watching that none of the steers so far rounded up should wander back to the range.

Next day further inroads were made into the grazing flocks on the range. A few more days of the same intensive effort would see all three ranches with their stock under fence, when the range would be deserted save for an occasional coyote, long-eared jack-rabbit or fleet pin-dog that might choose to scurry across the scenery.

Life at the Swinging J was now divided into two phases, one portion of the men toiling and playing at night, the other portion during the long, warm days. Unless the Swinging J and Lazy X cattle were driven to the fenced-in portion of the ranch it would be necessary to maintai a force of night riders. If the time should come when they would be compeled to use the fenced-in grass, then the Lazy X cattle would have to go, for there was not enough grass under fence for both herds, although Forest's own stock could graze indefinitely behind the barbed wire.

A week later, when only a few cattle remained on the range, the midnight repose of the bunkhouse was disturbed by a clatter of hoofs in the yard. Clive tumbled out, rubbing his eyes, to ascertain who the rider might be. Men scrambled out with him, dressing hurriedly.

Sled Fogarty, a rider for the Circle C, was outside, on horseback, and he hailed Clive as the Swinging J outfit piled from the bunkhouse in a mad rush.

"Hart sent me over to tell yuh that yuh could find out what all them cows was pulled off the range for, if yuh want to take a leetle *passear* over toward Saddleback Pass," he called.

"What's up," asked Clive.

"Well, you hombres yank on yore chaps and grab yore ponies. Foller me and yuh'll see the grandest leetle bunch of woolies percolatin' from the pass yuh ever laid yore two eyes on."

"Sheep!" exclaimed Clive, incredulously.

"Yeh, sheep," answered Sled. "They started comin' from the pass over two hours ago and I reckon they're still dribblin' through. Lord knows how many they is, but there must be a reg'lar army of 'em. They got shepherds what carry rifles, too, and they rides hosses," he added.

"Jingle," said Clive, "you go to the house and call Miss Forest. Tell 'er what's up and ask her if she wants to come with us. We're a-goin' down and investigate these woolies. I reckon there's no law to keep 'em out of here, not as long as they don't get on private property. They shore will make a hell of a place of the range in jig time, yuh bet cha, and we ain't got quite all of them cows off'n there yet, either."

By this time the bunkhouse had emptied, and the men were saddling ponies. Clive led out Thunder while Ormsby saddled two horses, one for himself, the other for Forest. She appeared, wearing a riding costume and high boots, and swung at once into the saddle, joining Clive and Sled.

"I reckon they'll be drivin' them sheep along this-a-way purty soon, Miss Forest," Clive said to the girl, "and if they do, they want to be dang' shore none of them woolies gets on our property. If they do, then they'll be trespassin' and we'll have a right to shoot the dirty critters."

"Hunh," exclaimed Sled. "If they was a-goin' to bring 'em up this road they'd be farther 'n this by now. Nope, they're a-shuntin' 'em off across old Bender's place, round the back way, and they'll cut across to the range by usin' a piece of the Diamond L, I reckon. They ain't a-comin' this-a-way, that's sartin."

They sped onward, passing the intersection of the Swinging J, Circle C and Bender's ranches. Down where the road stalked out of the high ground of the saddleback, they came on the sheep, thousands and thousands of them, piling pell-mell down the steep declivity, plaintive *ba-a-as* and clicking teeth keeping time to the sharp, metallic clatter of tiny hoofs on

the hard surface of the ground. A cloud of dust hung in the air and the pungent, unforgetable smell of dirty wool assailed their nostrils.

SIX men, each holding a rifle, sat in the road astride horses. They were shunting off to the right, across Bender's ranch, and keeping them from plunging straight ahead down the road. The Swinging J riders advanced and joined the rifle-bearers. One of these turned toward Clive, a question on his lips, rifle held significantly in the hollow of his arm.

"Well?" he ejaculated.

"I reckon I am," said Clive. "Them yore sheep?"

"Who wants to know?" came the insolent rejoinder.

Clive's eyes narrowed and he rode a step closer to the other, who immediately swung up his rifle and bared his teeth in a meaning grimace.

"You're close enough, mister," he warned. "I can talk just as well if you don't crowd me. What do you want?"

"Damn yore gun," said Clive, his voice warming and his blood rising. "I asked yuh if these was yore sheep."

"Oh," said the other, his voice still insolent. "I reckon I didn't understand yuh the first time. Nope, they ain't mine."

"The owner here?" Clive persisted.

"I can't say."

"Who's in charge, then?" Clive was fighting to hold his temper.

"I reckon Cougar Evans and Coldwater Sharp are bossin' this herd, mister. Do you want to talk with 'em?"

Clive's eyes widened with surprise. Cougar and Coldwater were two professional gunmen who sold their services to the highest bidder. They had once ranged the Rio Pecos country in Texas until the Rangers had finally camped on their trail and driven them out. They were scoundrels without conscience and it was hard to tell what they might do once they got started. The rider noticed Clive's surprise.

"Heard of 'em have yuh? Well, then you won't be startin' something yuh can't finish, mebbe."

"Yeh, I've heard of 'em," Clive answered, choosing his words carefully, "and I can tell yuh right now, mister that yo're a-workin' for a rattlesnake and a buzzard. They're two of the orniest, onreliable critters the Lord ever let breathe, and yuh can tell 'em I said so if yuh want."

"Not wishin' to see you absorb any lead sort of helpless like," sarcastically rejoined the herder, "I'll not tell 'em. It wouldn't be healthy for you if Cougar and Coldwater started on your trail."

"Then I'll give yuh a message for 'em, hombre." interposed Farrel, who had been listening quietly. "You tell them damn polecats to recall a leetle epysode that happened two year ago in Los Pinos. You tell 'em to remember the geezer that chased 'em both to the woods hell-bent, and after yuh tell 'em that just add that Two-Gun Farrell sent the word and is on the job here. Think yuh can remember to tell 'em all that?"

The other's face, clear and sharp in the brilliant moonlight, whitened visibly. There was a different tone in his voice when he answered Two-Gun.

"You can deliver yore own message to Cougar and Coldwater. I'm not interested whatever," he disavowed. "Me, I'm herdin' sheep, and I don't want you fellers to get any other impression about me. Sabe?"

While they talked a seemingly never-ending stream of dirty white had been erupting from the pass and spewing out across Bender's ranch. Clive saw that the wire fence had been taken down for a distance of perhaps three hundred yards, which proved that this was all part of a preconceived plan, and that old Bender was mixed up in it from the start. He turned to Honey Malloy and Shad Stevens.

"You fellers ride out the herds and tell the boys these sheep is a-comin' and that if any of 'em as much as steps a foot on our ranch or nibbles a single blade of Swingin' J grass, to shoot it and do it *pronto*," he ordered.

"Say, mister, I don't know you nor nothin' about you, but we're goin' to take these sheep onto open range down here in the valley, and it won't be good for anybody that tries to shoot any of our stock," a herder who had listened silently to the discourse up to this time chimed in. "I ain't aimin' to start any trouble, but a friendly warnin' in advance, mebbe, will save a lot of unpleasantness."

Clive turned toward the speaker, noting that his rifle was thrust in a boot attached to his saddle and that he carried a revolver slung at either hip, their hand-grips bared for quick use. His hands were smooth and white in the moonlight; his fingers

long and supple looking. Without a doubt he was a gunman, a two-gunman, and one who was here to ply his profession at the behest of those who had sent in the sheep. Clive's hand lowered until it swung over the butt of his .45.

"If any warnin's is needed 'round here, Mister Sheepherder, I'll give 'em, not you," he answered sharply. "Now, what I said about shootin' those woolies goes as she lays and if a dirty one of 'em sets a foot on Swingin' J ground it gets killed instanter. If yuh don't like muh words, reach for yore guns."

The other laughed insolently, his eyes cold and steady.

"Bozo," he said evenly, "if I ever goes for my guns, you want to go for the tall uncut as fast as the Lord 'll let you. I ain't never dragged my guns yet and left anybody to tell about it afterward, 'cept myself."

"You tell 'im, Streak," said another herder, ranging to one side.

"I ain't a-worryin' none," said Clive coolly, his eyes wary of the other's hands.

The gunman laughed softly.

"Yuh do seem purty cool," he admitted, "but I reckon you're a wind-bag that talks a lot and don't say much. As for that friend of yours, Mister Two-Gun Farrell, tell him any time he wants to pull them fancy little playthings he's a-wearin' I'm waitin' to oblige."

He said it purposely for Two-Gun to hear and the latter, turning his head slightly, saw that the herder's hands hovered near his guns. Two-Gun's face was unperturbed, but his hands moved suddenly. No one saw how or when, but they moved; twin reports split the air and two tiny flashes of light gleamed pale and cold.

Streak's hat lifted from his head and settled in the road, two holes in the crown. Streak himself looked into the muzzles of Two-Gun's six-shooters.

He thrust his own half-drawn weapons back into their holsters, a sneer on his lips. Coolly he looked at Two-Gun, without hint of fear.

"You win, Farrell," he said shortly, "this time. Next time, I'll be watching you."

Thus he passed over the incident, implying he had not been looking when Two-Gun drew. But Clive and a few others knew better; knew that Streak's eyes had been on Farrell every split second and that it was Two-Gun's speed that had been too much for the man. Farrell laughed, a slow, derisive outburst that brought a flush to Streak's face.

CHAPTER X

THE LINE RIDERS.

GENTLEMEN, I think it is hardly necessary for you to quarrel before you really have anything to quarrel about," Forest interposed. "I want to avoid trouble as long as possible."

Two-Gun bowed silently, but kept watchful eyes on Streak. Clive ranged his horse near Forest's. No further controversy ensued and for an hour they sat quietly watching the sheep belch out of the pass and *'ba-a-a'* their way across the Bender line. Before the last animal had left the pass the first salmon-pink sliver of dawn apeared high over the mountains.

Behind the last of the sheep were riders, a dozen or more, each with a rifle. They rode stolidly and silently, eyes on the sheep, and paying no attention to what went on around them. The last animal left the pass and turned onto the Bender ranch and the six riders who had blocked the road turned and followed. Clive saw several of Bender's riders approach, bearing wire and posts to repair the fence.

"We may as well *vamose*," he told the others. "Nothin' we can do here. All them woolies are in the valley now and I reckon the first of 'em is well across the Diamond L and headed for the open range by this time."

As they passed the Circle C on their road back to the Swinging J, Sled Fogarty turned aside.

"Hey, Tex," he called, "it ain't none of my horn in, but if yuh find yorese'f needin' another man or two, I'd plumb be admirin' to ride for yore outfit."

"Thanks, Sled; I'll let yuh know," said Clive, riding thoughtfully ahead.

"Well, this means a line-ridin' job from now on," Monte McCourt declared, back at the ranch, "and while I reckon that's just as easy as ridin' herd, it means we got to have more help from the Lazy X. Frog, you scoot over and tell old Simmons how things are a-stackin' up, and tell him I want at least six more men down this a-way."

Spud Garrett, who had been night riding, came in, the others of his shift with him. He reported the sheep had not yet

reached the range. Most of the riders were for going forth at once, meeting sheep herders and shooting it out with the riflemen, but Clive set his foot on that idea.

"We ain't doin' no shootin' 'thout we have to," he said. "Them sheep has a legal right on the range, even if their moral right is a dam' skinny one. We can only get busy if they happen to wander onto our property. You fellers go git yore breakfasts and turn in; there's goin' to be line-ridin' from now on, and yuh won't get a chance to set out there and sing to them cows no more. The rest of us is goin' out today and finish bringin' our stock on to the ranch."

By the time Clive and his party reached the range the sheep had arrived. In great, billowing clouds they spread across all the free grass-land on both sides of Cougar Creek, from Bender's and the Diamond L, north to the Box O fences.

Two-Gun Farrel spurred among the sheep with reckless abandon, caring not a whit that his horse's hoofs played havoc in the ranks of the woolly animals. He was bitter against all sheep and especially bitter against the three head men who were bossing these—Cougar Evans, Coldwater Sharp and the man called Streak. Farrell, in a word, was spoiling for trouble and went out of his way to start something.

But the sheepmen for the time being seemed to be operating under peace orders. None swallowed Two-Gun's bait, and when an occasional woolly bleated beneath his horse, the shepherds said nothing, merely watching silently and waiting. Toward evening the last of the cattle were sorted from among the sheep and the drive was sent across to Swinging J property.

That night there was a fresh division of forces. Simmons had sent ten men.

"And Simmons says to do as yuh dang' please, Monte, about runnin' his end of things and backin' up any play Tex makes," Frog, who brought the men reported. "He says he's gittin' as tired as the next one of all this shindig, and that he opines it might as well end in a grand jamboree as not if them dawgs of sheepmen start anythin'." Whereupon Monte chuckled.

"We got eight miles of line to ride," Clive declared. "Monte, you split yore men in two squads; I'm a-doin' the same with mine, and the first galoot that spots a woolly over our line has orders to let 'im have it dead center. If any of them shepherds try to start anything, I guess yuh all know what yo're to do—only, for cripe's sake, watch out for their rifles."

With the addition of the Lazy X hands, Clive now had under his command a total of forty-five men. Since the night trick had become a necessity, he apportioned off twenty men, under Shad Stevens, and gave them orders to patrol the entire eight miles of unfenced land that separated Forest's ranch from the open range. Under this arrangement each man would have a little less than a half-mile of line to guard, and Clive felt this would be adequate protection.

Monte appointed Sleepy as the nominal night head of his share of the night force, to act under Shad. Later, Clive and Monte rode out along the line and watched the riders take their appointed stations.

"If anything goes wrong, pass the word by relays," Clive directed as the riders separated. "Chick, yo're goin' the farthest out. If yuh need help, or yuh got anything important on yore mind, shoot yore six-gun three times quick. Next man hears it and repeats the performance and next man the same. *Sabe?* In less 'n a minute word can reach us at the bunkhouse that-a-way. Now, cowboys, do yore damnedest."

THE nearest sheep were not more than a quarter-mile distant and, knowing their penchant to wander while they grazed, Clive realized it would require alert eyes and constant vigilance, both on the part of his own men and the sheep herders as well, to hold the animals from Swinging J property. What puzzled him greatly was the ultimate objective of bringing the sheep into the valley.

There were fully twenty-thousand of them, and such a flock would make short shrift of the range grass. Aside from this range there was no other open ground in the valley. Only in the distant mountains, where the vegetation was scarce but sufficient to sustain the sheep as they passed through, could feed be found when the open range was clipped bare and the grass trampled deep under the dirt. By traveling fast and grazing as they moved, the sheep could maintain themselves indefinitely through the mountains, but it would be fatal to them to be caught for any length of time here in the valley.

Next morning Shad reported that things had been quiet during the night; the day

proved equally so. The second day and night also were peaceful, but on the third night, around two o'clock, the drumming of hoofs entering the ranch yard aroused the bunkhouse and the men tumbled out to greet Chick Purdy, who rode up with blood streaming from his left wrist.

"A rifle got me, I reckon," he said briefly. "I was ridin' quiet like and not thinkin' much about anything when I heard a rifle shot and felt muh arm go dead like I'd been kicked by a mule. I knowed right away I'd be'n shot, but it didn't seem serious enough to call you fellers out, so I told Shad about it and rode on in. Shad said he was a-goin' to plow down on that sheep camp, and that if he found out that there was a dirty rifle-barrel in the place he was a-goin' to let daylight through the hombre that owned it."

Clive got into his clothes rapidly, Two-Gun doing likewise. Blaze quickly attended Chick's arm, and pronounced the wound was not serious.

"Mebbe it ain't," said Clive, "but them hombres wasn't shootin' at Chick's arm, I reckon. They was aimin' for his haid and just naturally couldn't shoot straight by moonlight. I'm a-goin' out and join Shad, and Two-Gun's a-goin' with me. If Shad's found a rifle that's dirty, I reckon somebody's due to get his haid busted wide open."

With Two-Gun at his side, he rode off. They found the line deserted and four miles from the bunkhouse saw sheep drifting across onto Swinging J grass. Clive looked at them grimly.

"I reckon I orta brought some of the boys, after all," he opined. "Well, we cain't change our plans now. Come on, Two-Gun, I reckon the sheep camp's over this-a-way somewhere."

For an hour they rode along. It was nearly four o'clock by Clive's watch and already the sky was getting light in the east. Plowing recklessly among the sheep, Two-Gun taking special pains to rout the animals with his horse's hoofs, they finally rode up to the sheep camp, a cluster of dirty tents beside an irrigation ditch. They found Shad and the eighteen punchers with him carrying on a heated discussion with a short, slender man with grizzled hair and a wrinkled visage.

"Come here, Tex, and talk to this buzzard," Shad hailed. "He's be'n entertainin' me for a hour, but I reckon I can't make him understand plain American langwidge. You try it, and see if yuh can do any better. He says he's Joe Moore, in charge o' these sheep; I insists he's Joe Moore, a dang' polecat, but he won't get riled enough to start somethin'. Hell, sheepherders ain't got no guts a-tall." Shad spat disgustedly.

"Yuh find that gun, Shad?" Clive asked, riding close.

"Say, yuh might as well hunt for the devil's left eyebrow in a huckleberry bush as to try to find that gun around here. First place, they say all their guns is dirty and, second place, they won't let me see any of 'em."

Then Clive noticed a line of men standing silently back among the tents, rifles in hand. In their forefront was Streak and two other men Clive recognized instantly. These were Coldwater Sharpe and Cougar Evans. The three gunmen stood together. Clive saw Two-Gun's hands twitch as he caught sight of the trio.

"What yuh got to say, Moore?" Clive queried.

"Not a thing, mister," the sheepman answered. "As I be'n a-tellin' this rider of yours for the last hour, I don't know anything. He said he wanted to see our guns, and I accommodated him by tellin' the boys to step outside and show 'em to him. He didn't seem to want to see 'em that way, though. Well, that's the only way any of you beefies 'll ever get a chance to look at our weapin's, so you might as well pull your freight now."

"Well, hombre, we're here to find out who fired that shot." Clive dismounted as he spoke and walked close to where Moore was standing.

He noticed a shifting of rifle barrels back among the tents, but ignored it.

"Help yourself to findin' out whatever you want to know, Beefy," said Moore. "I ain't stoppin' you. I didn't do no shootin', I know that much, and furthermore, I didn't hear anybody say they done any shootin', either, and that's that."

Clive leaned forward.

"Listen to me, shepherd," he rasped. "I reckon about the lowest thing the Lord ever let walk in this yere valley was a sheep herder, and if yuh don't like my sayin' so, yuh know what yuh can do about it. Now, one of yore men or you, mebbe, shot one of my men. I'm a-goin' to find out who done it and make the damn skunk eat dirt."

The other's eyes gleamed viciously in the rapidly growing light of the new-born day and he chewed rapidly on his quid of plug.

"I don't like your words, Mister Beef Eater, and I ain't got no call to stand here and listen to 'em, either. This is open range and I reckon you're legally entitled to stay out here as long as you like, but don't pull any more of that kind of talk or I'll just nacherally let my boys claw you wide open."

CLIVE spat derisively, thrusting his sombrero high on his head and dropping his arms until his right hand swung near his .45. With his left hand he reached out, quickly, decisively, and between his thumb and the second joint of his first finger he caught Moore's nose, giving a mighty, twisting tug. There was a howl of pain and a roar of rage from Moore and the sheepman literally burrowed his face into the dirt as he went down. He rose, clawing at his bleeding nose. Behind him, Clive knew his own men were sitting rigidly, awaiting any orders he might give that would send them against the herders.

Moore reached his feet, fuming and spouting curses. Small he was, but game, and he was blinded by rage. He aimed a tremendous blow at Clive and the latter, rather ashamed now that he had used physical violence against a man only half his own size, grabbed the other's wrist and held it rigidly.

"Now, shepherd; don't yuh go figgerin' on whippin' a man, or I'll turn yuh over muh knee. Yuh leetle toad, I pulled yore nose 'cause yuh got fresh with yore betters, and I'll lamb yuh with a piece of palo verde if yuh don't keep quiet."

Moore was past all reason. As Clive released his hand, the sheepman drew back for another blow. Clive clinched and picked up the little man in his arms. Fifty feet distant ran the little irrigation ditch. There was little water in, but a goodly quantity of mud. Clive carried Moore to the piled-up bank-wall, held him poised an instant, then chucked him, head first into the sticky muck.

"Now, shepherd," he said as Moore, clawing mud and gasping for breath, crawled from the mire, "that orta cool yuh off. If it didn't, why I reckon I'll have to give yuh that spankin' I promised yuh a while ago."

The keen, vicious crack of a rifle, sounding from a ridge to the right, interrupted him. The angry *wham-m-m-m* of a bullet sang in his ears.

All turned in the direction of the shot. A rolling ridge lay in that part of the range and from the top of this the bullet had come. No one was in sight.

"Hands up, you damn beefies." Moore's triumphant voice called their attention back to him. "Stick 'em higher 'n a kite or out go your lights. We got you covered and we'll shoot hell out of the first man that makes a move for his gun."

The Swinging J and Lazy X punchers turned back and saw the line of rifles, level and menacing, backed by eyes that glared angrily along the barrels. Cougar Coldwater and Streak, revolvers dangling openly in their hands, stood advanced a little, ready for action. Rapidly Clive counted the opposing force. There were sixteen, and thirteen of the men carried rifles. He and his men were trapped neatly and there was nothing to do but take their medicine.

"Now, I want to serve a warnin' to you birds," Moore went on. "Get to hell away from here and don't you never come back. From now on we post sentries and the first man that comes this way that ain't peaceably inclined will get shot before he knows what it's all about. Now, get out, before I tell my men to cut loose."

Clive did the only sensible thing under the circumstances; he waved his hand toward the others and personally led the retreat, not heeding the ravings of Two-Gun Farrell and Shad Stevens, who wanted to stand their ground and shoot it out with the herders and gunmen.

"Yuh dang' idjuts," Clive snorted as they crossed back over the Swinging J line, "them buzzards have rifles and every man's got twice as many shots as any one of us. What's the matter with yuh, anyhow? Now, you fellers keep yore shirts on. We got to get some rifles, too, and we want to get 'em quick."

"There's a lot of rifles at the Lazy X, and I reckon old Simmons 'll let yuh use 'em," Sleepy spoke up. "I'll ride over after while and see about 'em. What say?"

"Go to it," McCourt agreed, and Clive nodded.

"Seems to me I saw a couple in Miss Forest's house, too," he recalled. "We only need enough to do some long-distance talkin' with them shepherds, I reckon."

"Hell, look at them woolies scatterin' across our grass," swore Shad. "Here's where I gets busy."

Clive forbade any wholesale slaughter

of the sheep, ordering, instead, that they be driven back to the range.

"It's all right to shoot one or two of them woollies when they cross our line," he said, "but they ain't no use killin' 'em wholesale. 'Tain't their fault, anyways, and I reckon the fellers that own 'em is countin' on us killin' off a bunch. Send 'em back over the line, then keep 'em out."

With the sheep once more cleared from the ranch Clive called a council of war on the spot.

"This thing is goin' to be plumb hell, boys," he declared. "I see where them fellers is goin' to lay off at a distance and take pot shots at us with their rifles; and they ain't goin' to try to keep the sheep off our ranch. I reckon I see their game now; they figger on the woolies workin' this way and gettin' in here in such numbers we can't handle 'em, after which they'll eat our grass all off and force us to sell off our stock. We orta have put a fence around the whole shebang, but that would cost a pile of dough, and Miss Forest can't afford it just now. Looks to me like this is goin' to settle itself into a reg'lar old-fashioned range war between cowmen and sheepmen."

Several heads nodded approval.

"This bein' the case, we got to adopt the old range tactics, but we'll improve on 'em. We'll dig some rifle pits and string some sections of wire out here. From this minnit on, every man that hears a bullet sing his way has orders to shoot the man that starts the trouble, if he can see him."

CHAPTER XI

THE RAID

FOR several days there was peace; then twice in one night Swinging J riders heard bullets sing by their ears, and judging by the consistency with which sheep managed to find their way onto the ranch it was evident that the herders were deliberately forcing the animals in that direction.

Day and night, now, when riders went forth they carried rifles in saddle boots and cartridges in saddle pockets, supplementing the side-arms all the men wore as a part of their daily garb.

A short time later, between midnight and dawn, when the bunkhouse was wrapped in peaceful repose, three quick shots, sounding nearby, roused Clive and his comrades. As rapidly as possible they dressed and scurried across the ranch. Jingle Jones was the first rider they met; he had fired the shots.

"What's up, Jingle?" Clive called as he came within speaking distance.

"I don't know, Tex; I heard Chick Purdy shoot and I just let go as per orders," came Jingle's reply.

"Well, come a-runnin', old-timer," Clive said, spurring by rapidly. "We'll find out what's wrong."

Chick Purdy knew no more than Jingle, he had hear Hokum Smith fire his revolver and had done likewise. Half-way across the ranch they found Hokum, sprawled in the grass, writhing in pain. Nearby lay his horse, shot through the head. Clive dropped from his saddle and knelt at Hokum's side.

"Where'd they get yuh, Hokum?" he asked, anxiously.

"Didn't get me a-tall," the fallen man replied. "They shot muh hoss and when he dropped I sorta got my foot tangled in the stirrup and the dang' hoss fell on muh laig. I reckon it's busted."

Clive straightened and looked off across the range to where the dirty tents of the sheep camp were visible, a mile distant, bathed in the brilliant moonlight. The stars were unusually bright, even for Arizona. Clive had no difficulty distinguishing the tents.

"One of you fellers help Hokum on a hoss and get him back to the ranch, where Blaze can fix him up. Two-Gun, grab a rifle. You and me is goin' up that ridge and see what we can see."

Reaching the ridge, Clive and Two-Gun laid down and looked carefully into the enemy camp. The only sign of life that was visible was a solitary figure that strode slowly about, rifle across shoulder, as though doing guard duty.

"Think yuh can knock off that buzzard's hat?" Clive asked Two-Gun. "I know I can, but I reckon yo're better with a gun than me."

"Not with a rifle, I ain't, Tex," Two-Gun replied. "If I draw down on that feller I'll like as not scatter his brains all over them sheep. You better do the shootin' if yuh don't want him killed plumb dead."

Clive sighted carefully and his finger tightened on the trigger. As the keen, whip-like report echoed across the range

the hat on the man's head bobbed and streaked through the air. He let out a yell and dashed for cover. Clive calmly sent a half-dozen shots through the tent tops, then led the way back to the ranch.

"Mebbe them bozos won't be so free with their lead if we pass it back to 'em occasional like." He chuckled.

It seemed that Clive had guessed right. A week went by without further manifestation from the other side. But a tenseness in the air suggested that things were approaching a fresh outbreak, and Clive never relaxed his vigilance for even a day. Therefore, he was worried but not greatly surprised a few mornings later when Jingle and Chick came in alone. They had not seen the others, they said, but as things seemed quiet on the range, they had not waited for them.

When the others did not appear by the time breakfast was finished, Clive decided it was time to seek them. With his riders beside him, he urged Thunder at top speed along the line. Five miles out they came upon great, moving waves of sheep, thousands and thousands of them, all grazing calmly on Swinging J grass. No herders were in sight, nor were any of Clive's night riders visible. Plunging through the sheep, not caring how many they trampled, they hurried on, finally reaching the fence of the Diamond L. There, bound with their own lariats, were their comrades, lying helplessly and breathing venomous curses.

The tales of all were similar; all had been surprised, tied up and dragged to the Diamond L fence and left to be found by whoever might come seeking them. It was evident that the thing had been carefully conceived and carried out, and it had been so successful that by now five or six thousand sheep were eating and tramping the life out of the Swinging J grass. Clive swore mightly, and turned with a sudden grim decision to Two-Gun and Bull Ellerby.

"Do yuh reckon we'd find all them shepherds at their camp now? I mean all of 'em, too; not just part of em. I was just a-wonderin' if we could round them skunks up and keep 'em under cover and quiet like until, say, tomorra night."

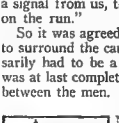
"Now yo're shoutin'," cried Shad. "They didn't take none of our guns and they didn't bother our hosses. We're most of us here. Let's go, cowboy."

"All right," acquiesced Clive, "but listen. Everybody get the idee, now. I want every last one of them herders caught; every man, understand? We can't afford to have a single one get away and spread word of what I'm a-fixing' to do. We got to circle that camp and take it from all sides at once. If they show fight, then we got to shoot it out with 'em, that's all."

They left their horses at the line and advanced on foot. Signs of life were plentiful at the camp and, looking down at it from the vantage point on the ridge, Clive for an instant doubted whether they would be able to surprise the place.

"They are bound to see us coming, Clive so we may as well make the best of it," Blaze Ormsby suggested. "I'll take some of the boys and circle to the right. Let Two-Gun take a few more and move off to the left. When we meet, we will come this way, closing in on them. You and the remainder of the boys stay here until you see a signal from us, then bring them forward on the run."

So it was agreed. It took time and care to surround the camp, for the circle necessarily had to be a large one, and when it was at last completed there were wide gaps between the men.



AN HOUR later Clive, watching intently, saw a hat on the end of a rifle barrel being held in the air and waved. Immediately he rose and told the others to follow. They had barely got under way when somebody at the camp let out a startled yell. Instantly the occupants of the dirty canvas came tumbling out, guns in hand, peering toward Clive and his men, unaware as yet of those who were approaching from the other sides.

"Don't shoot unless they do" Clive warned, "but, if they do let 'em have it. Aim low, 'cause we don't want to hit anybody over there with Blaze or Two-Gun."

Just then the sheepmen discovered the lines that were closing in elsewhere about them and, dropping to the ground, they brought their rifles into play. The cowmen dropped, too, and the bullets sang overhead without doing damage.

"If you fellers give in yuh won't get hurted none whatever, but if yuh try to shoot this thing to a finish, then I reckon yuh'll get good and plenty," Clive yelled.

"What do you want?" a voice cried. Clive recognized the nasal twang of old Joe Moore.

"We want you fellers to throw down yore guns," he answered. "If yuh'll do that we won't hurt yuh none, as I said, if yuh don't, then yuh got to take the consequences."

"We'll have the law on you for this," squealed Moore.

"Help yoresе'f," Clive invited. "Just now, howsumever, yuh'll do what I suggests or we'll just naturally pulverize yuh."

"All right. You got us cornered, and you're two to our one. We quit," Moore said it venomously.

"Cougar, Coldwater and Streak ain't here, Tex," Two-Gun remarked as the sheepmen were being tied securely.

"If they'd be'n here yuh wouldn't have taken us so easy," rasped the grizzled Moore, beligerent as ever.

"Shut yore bazoo, yuh damn polecat," growled Shad. "Yo're only gittin' what some of yore men pulled on us last night, and yuh orta be glad we don't take yuh out to a cottonwood and let six feet of Arizona air whistle under yore feet."

"Shad," Clive ordered, "get them together and herd 'em back to the ranch. For cripe's sake, don't let none of 'em get away. Then you fellers stay there with Miss Forest. I reckon we'll be back with yuh afore long."

He watched as Shad, Jingle and Reb drove the sheepmen off, then led the way back to the horses.

All day long they rode to and fro, waving their arms, herding the sea of dirty white back from the Swinging J acres, out onto the open range, and over toward the Box O and the Diamond L. It was no easy task, and the stars were shining before they finished.

Serene in the knowledge that their enemies temporarily, at least, were checkmated they made a hearty meal from the sheepmen's supplies, then found a bed under the open skies, sleeping until the first streaks of dawn roused Clive.

Breakfast came from the sheepmen's stores; the the work of urging the sheep forward was taken up again. As the last of the sheep passed the cluster of tents, Clive walked rapidly to each dirty heap of canvas. Behind him little bursts of flame cropped up and licked greedily at the greasy cloth. In a trice the camp was a heap of smoldering supplies. The pungent tang of sizzling bacon was mingled with the acrid smell of burning coffee and pepper and a series of popping explosions indicated that rifle ammunition was going up in smoke.

Again they urged the sheep forward, and when all were well against the intersection of the fences of the three ranches, the Box O, Crazy H and Diamond L, Clive, Two-Gun and Blaze set to work with their wire-clippers.

At the end of an hour they had opened great gaps in all three ranch fences and through these the sheep were pouring in, a literal sea of tossing heads and clicking hoofs.

Clive, watching as the sheep poured through and among the cattle-studded reaches of the enemy ranches, grinned widely.

"I reckon that's a-goin' to hold them fellers for a while," he chuckled.

Next morning, having heard nothing from the ranchers whose acres now held the sheep, they gave the prisoners hearty breakfasts and told them they might depart, provided they left the valley. This, all agreed to do.

"Where do yuh allow to go from here, boys?" Clive asked, his face innocent. "Yore camp caught fire sorta accidental like when them woolies got tangled up in it and yore things was all burned, even yore rifles. I reckon yuh'll have to get new outfits afore yuh can do any work ag'in."

"Them woollies can go plumb to the devil!" snarled Moore, his wizened face a mask of hatred. "We ain't a-goin' to monkey no more with 'em. We know when we got enough and we made no bargains to come down in this valley and play dog for nobody. We're a-goin' to get out right now and we're a-goin' to stay out."

"Well," grinned Clive, "I'm right sorry if we speeded up yore departure any, as the feller says, but *hasta luego, amigo mio.*"

Moore's parting salute was a venomous curse and:

"I ain't no friend of yours, and you don't need to give me any soft Mex farewells, neither. You and your ranch and this whole valley can go plumb to hell."

Clive chuckled.

"And old Bob Henley can go to hell, too," continued Moore.

Clive started this time. Bob Henley! That would be some member of the Henley Cattle & Sales Co., without a doubt. So that was where the inspiration and the capital for the sheep idea came from!

"Was it that Henley cattle buyin' firm in Chicawgo that hired yuh, Moore?" he called to the now departing Moore.

"Yeh," the wizened villain hurled back, "and yuh can tell them to go to hell, too."

With a wide grin on his face, Clive watched the herders disappear in the direction of Saddleback Pass.

CHAPTER XII

AFTERMATH

NATURALLY Clive did not expect the raid on the sheep camp to go by without some effort at reprisals. For three days there was peace and then the riders, ranging about the ranch, saw the billowing sea of dirty white once more spreading out across the open range land. Line-riding had to be resumed, but it was now comparatively easy to keep the sheep on their own grounds, for there were no longer any herders to keep urging them over onto the Swinging J.

All wondered what had become of Cougar, Coldwater and Streak, but those who had known the two former in other times also knew they probably were merely lying low for the time being, awaiting a favorable opportunity to strike and strike decisively. This surmise, in the end proved true.

Yank Davis, a puncher who rode for the Lazy X, was the first victim. He had been over to report to Simmons one day, according to a schedule that had been carried out all through the summer and autumn. He was returning late in the afternoon when, at the ford across Cougar Creek, he met Coldwater.

An altercation followed and guns flashed. Naturally, Yank got the worst of it. He came into the ranchyard of the Swinging J with his right arm broken between shoulder and elbow, a bullet in his right side and another in his leg. He was conscious two days, then sank into a coma that Blaze, despite all his efforts and skill, could not ward off.

On the fifth day Yank died. They buried him under the towering cottonwood, beside the grave of Wag Deering. Before he had lapsed into his last stupor he had been able to tell how Coldwater had accosted him and had gone for his gun. Yank, knowing he was hopelessly outclassed, had also reached for his, but too late. Coldwater's three bullets had found their marks.

Two-Gun Farrell was like a man afire following this incident. His normally pale face was, if possible, whiter than ever and his eyes constantly held little shooting green flames that would not die down. They flared high whenever Coldwater's name was mentioned. Despite Clive's pleadings and even his downright commands, Two-Gun ranged far and wide, his silver-mounted guns shining in the sunlight, seeking trouble; courting a meeting with Coldwater or anyone else who chose to draw and shoot it out.

After a week of this, when the soft, mild Arizona winter was coming on, Clive started to ride with Two-Gun, fearing he would be waylaid and overwhelmed with numbers and shot down in cold blood.

On a cool December day, when the orange trees were showing signs of the rich crops they would yield the following March and April, Two-Gun had his desires fulfilled. He, Clive and Faro Latimer had been over to the Lazy X for a chin-chin with old Simmons. They were returning along the highway where it crossed the Box O when five riders met them in the road. Coldwater was among them and Clem Jacobs also was there, having completely recovered from his wounds of the previous spring in the Swinging J ranchyard. Two-Gun saw Coldwater and the green flames in his eyes flared to their highest. He made a little clucking sound with his mouth and Clive, looking intently at him, saw that his face was as set and as white as a block of marble.

Coldwater gazed insolently at the trio, and Two-Gun returned his stare with interest. For the riders to pass it was necessary for one or both parties to pull to the side of the road. This Clive and Faro did, but Two-Gun allowed his horse to remain where it was. The Box O riders and Coldwater Sharp had spread the entire width of the highway; none of them pulled aside. Obviously, they intended riding the Swinging J riders from the road and down into the little irrigation ditch that paralleled it.

Clem Jacobs felt secure in the preponderance of numbers that lay with his side; he felt especially secure in the knowledge that Coldwater was with him, for Coldwater was a gunman extraordinary.

"Get to hell off of the road, Morgan," Jacobs rasped harshly, "or we'll run over yuh, yuh damn' piebald burro."

"Start tryin' any time yuh feel like it," Clive said coolly, his eyes glinting.

Faro Latimer was still ranged beside him, so the trio spread in a thin line halfway across the road.

"You heard 'em cowboys," Jacobs snapped over his shoulder.

Coldwater's hands were hovering above his guns, fingers twitching. Two-Gun Farrell sat easily, hands swinging loosely, eyes alert and fairly scintillating their green fires.

"Come on, men," Jacobs yelled. With the words he went for his gun.

Coldwater had been watching Two-Gun. At Jacobs's shout, his hands jumped for his gun-butts.

A blur of smoke drifted across the road. Two-Gun, watching Coldwater, had seen the latter start to draw. As the gunman's hands moved, Farrell's two guns exploded as a unit. A bluish hole appeared like magic above Coldwater's eye. Coldwater's revolvers, barely half raised, went off harmlessly into the hard-packed dirt of the road. The man himself was dead before he started to pitch from the saddle.

Two-Gun, flipping his weaons, fired two more shots, then felt Faro slump heavily against him. He reached out an arm and steadied his comrade.

"That's all, Two-Gun!" Clive yelled.

Two-Gun thrust his weapons in their holsters and turned to look at Faro. Blood poured over his face and his eyes were closed. His sombrero was gone. Anxiously, Two-Gun ran an exploring finger across a gash in Faro's scalp, then swore delightedly.

"Creased him, that's all," he exulted. "Yuh can't kill good old Faro nohow. They split his scalp and let out a lot of blood, but I betcha he's all right come tomorra."

Clive dropped from his saddle and examined the damage they had inflicted on their foes. Coldwater and Clem Jacobs were dead, but the other two were breathing. The fifth man was pulling leather hell-bent down the road. Clive, with years of range experience behind him, had seen many wounds; was sure that with proper care the two would survive.

"We'll put 'em on that hoss that Coldwater rode, and when we passes the Box O trail we'll head 'em in that-a-way and let the hoss take 'em to the ranch-house," he directed. "We can't let 'em lay here helpless like."

Two-Gun, now that he had avenged Yank, was happy and his dourness of the last several days fell from him. He held Faro while Clives fastened the wounded men to the horse and led the way down the road. He had already bandaged Faro's head with what materials he had at hand and now that worthy opened his eyes, to wonder what had happened.

"I shore thought that was the end," he said finally. "I saw that hombre's gun go bust right in muh face, just after I pulled the trigger of muh own six-gun. That's the last thing I recalls. Did I git him?"

"He's there on that hoss, shot through the neck," Two-Gun told him. "I reckon he won't die, but he shore will have trouble eatin' for some time to come."

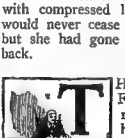
Faro straightened in his saddle, feeling life pulse back through his veins rapidly. Save for a slight dizziness he proclaimed himself as well as ever. When they passed the Box O trail and turned the laden horse through the gate, heading it toward the ranch-house, a fusillade of shots rattled from back among the orange trees and bullets whistled about their ears.

Faro was now in the lead and his horse took the fence on the opposite side of the road at a bound, landing cleanly on the other side and bounding off across the grass. Clive touched Thunder's ribs and the noble black cleared the wire with even greater ease than had Faro's animal. Another fusillade sounded and Two-Gun's horse went plunging into the wire just as it was leaving the ground to make the leap. Two-Gun shot across its head, landing over the fence. Clive reined in and turned back. He saw Two-Gun rise and run toward him.

"Come on, Two-Gun," he cried. "Climb on Thunder. He'll carry us both and still out-distance anything they've got on the Box O."

Their flight was hastened by more shots and the heavy lead slugs from several rifles whistled about them. They rounded a drove of steers, clipped the top strands of a wire fence and clattered safely into the highway.

Forest received news of the encounter with compressed lips. Her tender heart would never cease grieving at bloodshed, but she had gone too far now to draw back.



THAT night Clive and Forest sat in the living-room of the ranch-house discussing the situation in the Cottonwood Valley, and Forest made a suggestion that had been in her mind for weeks.

"Clive, if the Henley Cattle & Sales Co. is back of all this, why can't we start a direct action against them? It seems to

me that, so long as they are permitted to continue the hiring of men to persecute us, we'll never be rid of this warfare. Surely, there is some way to reach them directly."

"Yuh shore said something, Miss Forest, but so far the only way I've seen to hit at them fellers is to strike twice to their once."

"But our present methods are too brutal, Clive. It is all very well to say that the enemy who are dead deserved to die, but just think of the name you are making for me while you are doing all these things." She spoke earnestly and a little sadly.

Clive chuckled boldly, not at all in sympathy with her mood.

"Any time yuh don't like yore name, Miss Forest, yuh can shore change it mighty quick, I reckon," he said daringly.

She looked at him, a little puzzled, a little confused.

"I don't think I quite understand you," she said slowly.

Clive thereupon was abashed, but he was not the man to start a thing and not complete it.

"I was just a-thinkin' that any time yuh got tired callin' yorese'f name of Glade, yuh might change it to Morgan," he continued. His eyes now met hers fairly.

If he had expected her to be taken aback he was mistaken. She returned Clive's gaze without wavering. If anything, his remark lifted her out of her despondency and roused the other side of her feminine nature. A half-smile stole over her face.

"Clive Morgan, is that a proposal?" she asked, and he was certain there was a joyous lilt to her voice.

This time Clive was routed. Never much for women, he did not know how to take them, and, now that she had turned the situation squarely back upon him, he fell down wofully.

"Well, yuh can call it that if yuh want to, I reckon," he managed to mumble, "though I guess mebbe I wasn't just meanin' it dead earnest like——"

He realized that he was making things worse for himself and stopped in confusion, his cheeks stained crimson beneath their tan. The girl's merry laugh dinned in his ears.

"He proposes and hasn't the nerve to back it up," she said softly. "My, what a bold, bold man he is. One would never think he could face six-guns and sheep herders and such when he is so fearful of a puny, helpless girl. However, I shall seriously consider his question, and, if I decide that he actually proposed, I shall let him have my answer later."

Baffled by her laughter and somewhat aloof way of addressing him, Clive rose and stumbled from the room. On the veranda he paused and kicked himself viciously.

"Clive Morgan, yuh plumb damn fool," he growled to himself, "ain't yuh got no sense a-tall? Next time yuh try to propose to that gal, *do* it, and don't just go lallygaggin' along like a school kid with a mash on his young teacher. Oh, hell!"

"Say, Blaze, you bein' the only one among us that a man might call real eddycated like, I want yore advice on somethin'," Clive said to Ormsby, back in the bunkhouse.

"What is it, Clive? Are you in love, or sick at your stomach? You look just now as though either might be ailing you. I've always found that bicarbonate of soda is good for a man in either case, too."

Clive flushed guiltily.

"Don't start none of that, now, Blaze, or you and me 'll mix it right here and now. I want yuh to tell me if yuh think it would be worth while to go to Chicawgo and see them Henley fellers about this here range war. Think we could go back there and throw a scare into them buzzards sufficient to make 'em call off their dogs here in the valley?"

Ormsby immediately turned serious and dropped beside Clive on a bunk.

"The only way to reach the Henley people as a firm, Clive, is to go to law," he said. "I don't imagine there is even any way you can do that, either, for things are too complicated here. As I understand the situation, the Henley concern actually owns these ranches, but operates them through dummy owners who in reality are only managers and carry out the Henley policies. Deeds and other records in the court-house at Sunset fail to show any connection between these ranches and any of the Henley concern, so we'd have a fine time proving anything in court against them."

He paused as Clive thought this over.

"As for the ranchers here in the valley," Blaze continued, "it would be rather useless for us to proceed against them. We have done them more damage that they have inflicted on us, and if we went after them in the courts, charging them with murder and arson, they would file counter charges of the same kind against us. If

by any chance we won our case against them, it would be against them as individuals, and not against the Henley Company. In other words, if the Henley firm does own these ranches and we won a court suit against these alleged owners, all the Henley people would do would be remove the men here and place new owner-managers in charge. In that event we'd be no further than we are now. The best thing we can do, in my opinion, is to continue as we are until we can get definite proof against the Henley Cattle & Sales Co. as a firm, and then act."

Clive gazed at Ormsby, a rapt expression on his face. He drew a deep breath.

"My cripes, Blaze," he said, "if I could talk like that I'd give a million dollars, if I had a million dollars. Now, I want yuh to do me a favor. I want yuh to go to Miss Forest and talk to her just like yuh talked to me about this thing. She seems to have a idee that we ought to get in the courts *pronto* like, and I reckon I ain't got the proper lingo to tell her that our way is the better one."

"Anything you say, Clive," Ormsby agreed. "I'll even propose to her for you, if you'll just say the word."

He ducked Clive's swinging fist and retired amid a gale of laughter that swept through the bunkhouse.

"I reckon you dang' doodle-bugs think that was funny," Clive said wrathfully, "and yuh can every last mother's son of yuh go plumb to the devil and pitch his tent for 'im."

After listening to Ormsby's view of the situation, Forest next morning expressed herself as being satisfied to wait, in the hope that something definite would ultimately be uncovered that would pin the guilt of the valley warfare on the Chicago concern. Thus the matter was allowed to rest for the time being.

Day followed day in rapid succession, but all was peaceful. Since the deaths of Coldwater and Clem Jacobs there had been no further clashes, and soon the sheep began to disappear from the range, a few at a time. They would have starved if left there longer, for they had eaten the range grass down to the dirt. Now that the animals had to be cared for, the men of the Diamond L, Bar T, Crazy H, Box O, Dollar M and M-T made no bones about dividing them up and taking them onto their pastures until such time as they could be sent out of the valley.

On the day this occurred the Swinging J riders, Forest with them, sat at the lower end of the Circle C and watched the woollies disappear into Saddleback Pass. Clive laughed satisfiedly.

"Another one of their plans gone plumb wrong," he chuckled, "I reckon it cost them Henley people a dang' big pile of money to run them woollies in here and out ag'in, and it didn't get 'em anything after all. The range won't be no good ag'in till next spring, and that means all their ranches'll have more cows under fence than they can handle properly. I hope the onmannerly skunks goes busted; that's me."

CHAPTER XIII

FOREST DISAPPEARS

EVER since his talk with Ormsby, Clive had determined to get some evidence that could be used to convict the Henley Cattle & Sales Co. of inspiring the outrages that had set the valley afire with strife. How to obtain such evidence was a problem that threatened to overwhelm him in the solving. From what Sleepy and others had told him, he knew that nearly everyone in the valley believed that Bender and the other ostensible ranch owners were exactly what they purported to be, and scouted any suggestion that the Chicago commission house was behind all the trouble. Clive himself sometimes felt doubts, too, for try as he would he could not hit on a definite motive for the virulence with which the Henleys had conducted the warfare.

During the long, peaceful days that followed, Clive scoured the valley from end to end, hoping always that he might by some unforeseen stroke of good luck run across the evidence he was seeking. He met riders from many of the other outfits on occasions, but aside from a few hot verbal clashes no trouble developed.

Forest left her semi-seclusion and joined Clive frequently in long rides about the ranch, and even through the valley, and there were occasions now when she took long rides alone. At first he protested against this, but finding it futile desisted. And so it came a day when Clive was off examining some water-holes, that Forest emerged from the ranch-house, asked Pink Sellers to saddle her sorrel mare, and galloped away across the range. Pink gave the incident little attention and as Forest disappeared around the corral he

went into the bunkhouse and busied himself with a game of solitaire.

It was not until the evening meal, when Clive noticed that Forest was not in her accustomed place at the head of the table, that Pink told him of the incident. Alarmed, Clive sent Charley Long scurrying off to her room, to learn if she had returned. Pink ran to the corral to ascertain if the sorrel mare was inside. Both he and the Chinaman returned at the same time with negative reports.

This was the latest Forest had ever remained out on one of her rides and Clive was genuinely alarmed. He glanced at the sun, still an hour above the western range of the Mogollons, and shook his head.

"Well," he opined, "mebbe she's just a-ridin' somewheres and'll be back *pronto*, but I'm sort of worried like. If she ain't back in a hour, we're a-goin' to start after her."

The hour dragged passed and as the last second ticked off Clive, standing on the roof of the bunkhouse, gazed out across the range, all red and amber and gold in the light of the setting sun. He could see for miles across the plain, but not a sign of the girl was visible.

He slid from the roof, landed lightly on the balls of his feet and straightened, tightening his belt. The day riders had come in from the line and the night riders were getting ready to start out. Clive looked over the assembled punchers, noting that all were watching him anxiously.

"Monte, let yore night men ride alone tonight, and do double distance," he requested. "I want all the boys that can be spared to come with me. There's something up, and I'm a-goin' to locate it. If anybody's hurt Miss Forest, God help 'em!"

Two-Gun Farrell set his hat more firmly on his head and turned toward the corral.

"Come on, cowboys; get yore hosses and let's get a-goin'," Clive called.

Ten minutes later the party clattered away from the corral and sped across the range, moving toward the ford across Cougar Creek. It was in this direction, Pink Sellers said, that Forest had gone.

In a short time the sun left them and the soft Arizona night came on. Brilliant, low-hanging stars of startling luster lighted their way; the moon lent its golden splendor to the occasion, casting a glow over the countryside that made even the shadows of the tuft grass visible.

Swiftly they urged their horses along, Clive setting a stiff pace with Thunder. They watched the way closely for signs that might guide them on Forest's trail, but found nothing that would help them. At the ford, however, they came upon evidence a-plenty.

The sorrel mare, a bullet in its brain, lay under the willow clump beside the road, saddled and bridled, just as it had fallen. The road showed signs of the tramping of many hoofs, and an occasional mark left by a high-heeled boot was visible. Clive dismounted and dropped on his hands and knees, crawling about. After five minutes he rose.

"They got her, all right," he said grimly. "I don't know who, though. It happened early, I reckon, probably as soon as she struck the ford. I be'n huntin' to see if I could find which way the dirty skunks went after takin' her, and, near as I can figger it out, they cut up along Cougar Creek, through these willers. Leastwise, all these tracks leave the road about fifty feet back, and I follered 'em through the soft dirt that breaks all along here. We might as well start up the Cougar, too. Keep yore eyes peeled, for we got to look for signs from now on."

NOW that his worst fears were confirmed; now that he knew Forest had met with misadventure, if not actual foul play, Clive's face grew tense and gray and little lines set at the corners of his mouth. Quietly, but with a deadly earnestness, his riders headed their ponies upstream.

The shadows were thick among the willow trunks and frequently Clive or Two-Gun swung from the saddle and peered intently at the ground. Each time there followed the order to keep going. After a time, Blaze Ormsby pulled up suddenly.

"Just a minute, Clive; I've found something," he called in a low tone.

He reached out a hand toward a drooping willow branch and drew it back, holding something in it.

"If I am not mistaken, Clive," he said gravely, "this is a piece of the scarlet ribbon Miss Forest wore in a bow on her shirt front, just where she turned the collar in."

Clive and Two-Gun examined the bit of silk. Both recognized it. Either the girl had intentionally left this as a marker or her neck ribbon had caught on the pro-

jecting willow branch as she was carried past it. Clive carefully placed the telltale bit of silk in the breast pocket of his shirt.

Now positive of their direction and satisfied they were on the trail of the missing girl, they rode forward more quickly, Clive, Two-Gun and Ormsby leading, with Monte, Shad, Spud Garrett and Bull Elerby close behind. The others followed as closely as they could.

"We're a-goin' to be plumb across the Box O in a minute or two," observed Bull, "and a-headin' across the Crazy H. I wonder where they took that gal?"

"We'll know afore we turn back," Clive promised grimly.

Two-Gun nodded in corroboration. He was now riding slightly in advance. Ever since Ormsby had discovered the bit of flaming ribbon, Farrell had been scanning the ground and the willows on either side of them closely. Now, of a sudden, he pulled in and dropped from his saddle, stooping. When he straightened up, he held another bit of the ribbon and passed it along for inspection.

"Game clear through!" exclaimed Ormsby. "She's intentionally leaving markers for us—blazing the trail, as it were."

In the next hour they found three more pieces of the scarlet silk and, after a time, they came upon a piece of white, evidently torn from her handkerchief.

Then they lost the trail. It was Two-Gun who picked it up again, fifty yards back, where it turned abruptly into the stream. The opposite bank gave no indication that the horses had emerged there and after a consultation it was decided the pursued had continued up the stream, keeping to the water to hide their horses' tracks, for the creek was only a shallow brook this far up the valley.

With riders on either bank watching for the trail to emerge, they continued up the creek. The signs from the girl were no longer found and shortly after midnight, having traversed the entire width of the Box O, and a portion of the Crazy H, they found themselves staring at a sixty-foot waterfall that tumbled out of the mountains at a point where Cougar Creek began its winding course through the valley.

Baffled, they discussed the situation hurriedly. A score of guesses were offered as to why they had lost the trail, the most plausible being that they had overlooked it, despite the brilliance of the moon. The only thing to do was to go back and search for where the trail left the creek, so they turned down-stream, eyes more alert than ever.

Eventually they came to where the bit of white had been found and the trail turned into the water, but not once had they found a sign that it had left the creek.

"It does beat hell," exclaimed Honey Malloy, "where they coulda gone to. There ain't a sign of 'em between here and that waterfall, and I don't reckon there's anything could go up that ratyract; not even a salmon, which same I've seen jump a eighteen-foot fall; yes, sir, seen 'em with muh own eyes."

"We ain't a-disputin' about the salmon," rasped Clive. "What we want to do is find where them buzzards took Forest."

He was wild with grief and worry, realizing for the first time how great was the love he bore for the girl. His heart was like lead and his brain was afire. Only Ormsby surmised his true condition and he laid a quick, sympathetic hand on Clive's arm.

"They won't kill her, old-timer," he said gently. "I rather imagine their game is to endeavor to make her agree to sell out, or something like that. Or, perhaps they will hold her as a sort of hostage to compel us to get out. Really, I don't think we need fear for her."

Clive was grateful for the words and the cheerful hope they expressed, but his worries and grief would not ease. He looked at his riders, noting that all awaited his lead. Swiftly, he resolved on the only course left.

"Just on a chance that they went that a-way, Shad and Bull and Monte and all you Lazy X men ride down-stream on the other side," he ordered. "The rest of us 'll take this side. It might be them buzzards turned down-stream 'stead of up and come this far to throw us off the trail."

The search was resumed, until the ford was reached once more. Forest's dead mare still lay under the willow clump, and Clive made another search of the vicinity. The best he could learn was that the riders had turned from the road fifty feet from the stream, thence ridden directly up the creek, in the direction from which they had just come.

Two-Gun spurred close to Clive, his eyes somber and fretful.

"We can't call things quits here, Tex; I got a idee we might pick up something if we ride downstream from here. Me, I'm a-goin' that a-way, too. Leave the forces divided as they are, and let's go, cowboy."

Clive gave the order and the search started, but not a man among them, save Two-Gun, felt anything would come of the ride in this direction. All save Farrell felt that the solution to the mystery of Forest's disappearance lay up-stream, toward the waterfall. They went at their task grimly and with an earnestness that spoke volumes. Left hands held reins lightly, while right hands never swayed far from handy gun-butts.

It was Two-Gun who made the discovery. Riding easily, eyes now on the ground, now on the willow branches, he suddenly threw himself from the saddle and picked up a tiny piece of scarlet silk, holding it aloft.

"I reckon I had the right idee, Clive," he called softly. "She's a-goin' this-a-way, all right. I reckon she used that piece of white back there 'stead of red ribbon to try and tell us somethin' had happened there, and we was all too dumb to onderstand. Here's her red ribbon ag'in. I reckon that proves we're a-goin' in the right direction once more."

"But where's the trail?" asked Spud Garrett.

"I reckon it's in the water, Spud," Two-Gun answered gravely. "Yuh can ride this dang Cougar Creek from one end of the valley to t'other, I reckon, it's so shaller. Look-a-here, and yuh'll see the gal used several hair-pins to make this hefty enough to fly through the air. I reckon she just nacherally throwed it ashore when she passed here. Come on, let's speed up."

AFTER a time they reached the line of the Swinging J, where the creek crossed it.

"They actually took her right back across her own ranch." Clive cursed bitterly. "Hell, but they got nerve. Well, I reckon that settles where she is, then. They either got her at Bender's or she's be'n switched over to the Diamond L. Ain't no other ranches down this-a-way 'cept the Circle C, and Bud Hart ain't in with this valley bunch, none whatever."

They followed the stream across the entire width of the Swinging J and then, a half mile after they had started over Bender's ranch they found where the trail left the water. Now a new problem presented. The trail split, then split again and again. Hoofprints led off toward Bender's; others pointed straight down the stream; some led toward the Swinging J, and still others turned in the direction of the Diamond L.

Once again it was the girl, aided by Two-Gun's acumen, who was responsible for a clue. A tiny bit of white lay on the ground, along the trail that started toward Bender's. Two-Gun picked it up and handed it to Clive.

"See that?" he asked. "'Member back up the creek when we found the other white one? It meant there was a change in the trail, that they wasn't a-goin' in the direction we figgered a-tall. Well, I take it she left this white one here to mean the same thing."

Clive's face lighted swiftly.

"I betcha yo're right, Two-Gun," he exclaimed. "We was all a-figgerin' she was a-bein' took to Bender's place, which proba'ly ain't the case a-tall. Well, we'll foller these tracks to the Diamond L and see what happens. C'mon."

He was off like a streak, the others following close behind him.

Again Two-Gun was right. They had gone only a short distance when they found another bit of flaming silk.

It was barely dawn when they approached the Diamond L. They had found three more bits of the girl's neck ribbon; then there had been no more. The trail was plain now and either Forest had decided to take no further chances in dropping the path-markers, or her captors had increased their vigilance and made it impossible.

The silence of death hovered over the ranch-house as Clive and his party drummed into the yard. The house was closed up tightly and the shades were drawn.

Clive let out a hail. Almost instantly there came proof that there was life inside.

"You fellers get out o' here," a voice cried. "If yuh come to raid this place, yo're a-goin' to get hurt. I got plenty of guns and men in here and yo're shore goin' to get some'ead if yuh try any stunts here like yuh pulled on old Horner's barn."

"You send out that gal right away, and in consideration of same I'll agree yuh won't get hurt none, now," said Clive. "If we have to come and take her out o' there, I reckon yo're a-goin' to be plumb down-right sorry."

"What gal yuh talkin' about?" the voice queried.

"Yuh know damn' well I mean Miss Glade of the Swingin' J," Clive answered.

"I ain't seen her, never did see her, and

what's more I don't want to see her," the voice came back.

"Perhaps the man is speaking the truth, Clive," said Blaze. "We'd better be sure."

"What's he got the place all shut up for that-a-way?" Clive demanded.

"Let's go to the corral and see if we can find any horses there that have water marks or mud in their hair," urged the cool-brained Ormsby. "If we do, then it is pretty conclusive that Miss Glade is inside, I'd say."

In the corral they found a half dozen horses, all bearing unmistakable signs of having recently been in the water. They were dry, but mud still clung to their legs and also spotted their sides and bellies. Just above where the stirrups would reach there was a water-line, and the hair was matted and stiff from that point down to the animals' hoofs.

"Hello, inside," Clive yelled, as he returned to the ranch-house.

"What do yuh want now?" came the questioning reply.

"We got positive evidence Miss Glade's in yore house, and we're a-goin' to take her out of there if we have to tear the roof off!"

The spang of a six-gun answered them. The bullet struck Pink Sellers' horse in the nose, just as the animal threw up its head in an effort to dislodge a fly. That act probably saved Pink from getting the slug in his chest. As the horse dropped, Pink landed lightly on his feet, gun in hand. As fast as he could pull the trigger, he fired six shots toward an upstairs window whence the first shot had come.

"Hunt cover," Clive ordered and led a dash around the bunkhouse.

As they rounded it a hail of bullets splattered against the boards and dug up the earth, but the only casualty was a gash on the rump of the horse Bull was riding. Back of the bunkhouse they dismounted and tethered their horses.

Chapter XIV

THE FIGHT AT THE RANCH

"HERE ain't no use in us wastin' bullets on them walls," Clive advised a hastily called council of war. "We got to devise some scheme to get them fellers out of there and to get ourselves inside. Anybody got a suggestion?"

It seemed that everybody had. Chief among the ideas set forth was a plan for all to storm the house and crash their way inside, routing the occupants at the points of revolvers.

"No, I don't reckon we want to do that," Clive said finally. "I wish we could set fire to the place. They'd have to get out and I reckon they'd bring Forest with 'em. Nobody but a dirty Injun would think of leavin' a girl behind to burn."

"But how're we goin' to get close enough to set fire to the damn place?" rasped Pink, fuming over the loss of his horse and already seeing in his mind's eye the Diamond L animal that he would pick out to replace it.

"We're gathered here to thresh this out," Clive reminded him. "Now, all of yuh think and think quick. Me, I'm a-goin' to do some thinkin' muhse'f."

Two-Gun Farrell, gazing off toward the barn, suddenly had an inspiration and whispered to Shad. The latter nodded in violent approval and turned to Clive.

"Say, Tex," he said in a low voice, "Two-Gun's just had a idee and him and me's goin' to try it out. See that wagon over there by the barn? Well, we'll fill it up with hay or straw or whatever we can find over that-a-way and push it up ag'in that house. When we get the wagon bang up ag'in the wall we'll set 'er afire and skedaddle hell-bent out of the way. I don't know as there's any easier way of gettin' that pile of boards a-burnin'."

"That shore is a fine idee," Clive agreed, "but I reckon yuh'll need some help to push that wagon along. Blaze and me'll both go with yuh, and we'll get that place to burnin' in a jiffy."

It was decided that Pink Sellers and Spud Garrett also would assist. Then Clive addressed a parting word to the others, speaking directly to Bull Elerby.

"Bull, you fellers get a line on some of them winders and blaze away. I don't reckon they got Forest in the line of fire, but send yore first shots high so that if she is in one of them rooms the bullets won't hit her. After yuh locate where she is, or get no results, use yore own judgment, only, for cripe's sake, don't shoot onless yo're sartin she ain't in front of yore guns."

Bull opened the ball by emptying his gun through one of the downstairs windows. At the first jingling crash of broken glass a fusillade broke out from the house and bullets spattered against

the bunkhouse walls like hail on a stubble field.

"I reckon that waked 'em up," chuckled Bill.

Cautiously Clive, Two-Gun, Blaze and the others crept off. Between the bunkhouse and the stately row of cottonwoods that paralleled the ranch yard was a vacant space, fifty feet wide. To gain the trees and thus make the barn under their cover this space had to be crossed, and every foot of it in the vicinity of the bunkhouse was commanded by the guns inside the Diamond L ranch-house.

"I reckon there ain't anything better to do than blaze away, so here goes," Shad declared, tearing across the intervening width.

Before Clive could stop him the valiant Stevens had dashed out across the open space and scudded under the over-reaching limbs of the giant cottonwoods. He reached these before those in the house, surprised by his daring, could turn their guns on him.

"Don't you fellers all run over in a bunch," he called, from his vantage point. "Scatter and come fast. I reckon yuh'll make it; only be careful, 'cause I 'spect they'll be a-watchin' for yuh now."

"Yuh think we're plumb damn fools?" snorted Spud Garrett. "I reckon we wasn't borned yesterday. Yuh want to see how I'm a-comin' over there? Well, here's how."

On the instant he gave a prodigious leap, turned a hand-spring, flopped on the ground, rolled over and over, then rose, head down, knees pumping swiftly. In a trice he made the cottonwoods. A score of bullets kicked up the dirt where he had crossed.

"That was one they wasn't 'spectin'," chortled Spud. "Ain't none of 'em ever had no practice a-shootin' at anything travelin' like that, I reckon. Thought I was a side-winder, more'n likely. Well," he called across to the others, "hop to it, you fellers; we're a-waitin'."

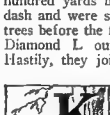
Two-Gun Farrell had watched silently, while Shad and Spud made the cottonwoods, his eyes flaring admiringly. Now he turned to Clive.

"I reckon the next feller that crosses is due to get hit, Tex," he said. "That gang'll be watchin' close and prob'ly they've got their guns at a level to sweep the whole shebang. I reckon we got to figger another way to cross, 'less we want to take on necessary chances of pickin' up some lead."

"I think yo're right, Two-Gun. What yuh got on yore mind?"

"I was thinkin' if we go straight down this road a-piece, keepin' the bunkhouse atween us and their guns, we can get far enough out that we won't be in much danger from their lead. Then we can cross and come down behind the cottonwoods."

Without replying Clive turned and led the way, the others close behind him. A hundred yards back they made a sudden dash and were safely behind the outlying trees before the first shots of the besieged Diamond L outfit came toward them. Hastily, they joined Shad and Spud.



KEEPING the trees between themselves and the house, they worked down toward the barn. At the same time Bull Ellerby, from the bunkhouse, ordered a constant fire maintained against the beleaguered inmates of the ranch-house. Once, when it seemed their ruse was not going to hold the attention of those within, the daring Bull, followed by Monte McCourt, Lonesome Hines, Jingle Jones and Mojave Evans, dashed from their shelter as though to storm the house.

They stopped short ten feet distant and scurried back behind the building, beating the Diamond L bullets by a hair. But the maneuver had gained what they sought. Those inside, fearful now that if they deserted their posts a raid would follow and result in their capture, kept constant vigil at the windows. A few Bull surmised, had been sent to the other side of the house to keep a lookout on what Clive and his comrades were doing at the rear.

Wyoming Red Hargrave suddenly scrambled from his recumbent position behind Bull Ellerby and pulled himself through a bunkhouse window, disappearing inside.

"What's that dang' bow-laiged hoptoad up to now?" Silk Kingsbury, watching him, murmured. An instant later the grinning face of Wyoming was back at the window.

"You fellers come in here, some of yuh," he called. "We can get to the other end of this shebang and rake the whole end of that house through these winders. Yuh can't reach that part of the house from out there, but yuh shore can raise hell from in here. 'Bout five of yuh come a-runnin."

Bull waved his hand and lazy Turner,

Piute Allen, Mojave, Brindle Thorp and Hokum Smith crawled within and joined Wyoming. A minute later a blast of firing inside the bunkhouse and startled yells from the ranch-house apprised them that Wyoming had originated a plan well worth while.

"Hey, you fellers out there; get out and let us alone," a voice from the house shouted. "We ain't got that dang' gal yo're a-talkin' about, and don't know nothin' about 'er. We're just nacherally goin' to chaw yuh up if yuh keep on shootin' at us."

"I reckon yo're a damn liar," Bull's hoarse voice roared back, "and as far as the chawin's concerned just go ahead and chaw away and be danged to yuh."

As though this were a signal for redoubled activities, the firing from the house became intense. None of the Swinging J riders could put a head around the bunkhouse, and even those inside were forced to do their firing through the windows with extreme caution.

Meantime, down at the barn, Clive and his little force had jockeyed the wagon around and were piling it high with dry range grass, cut sometime previously for hay. Pitchforks were wielded with feverish energy, Two-Gun setting the pace.

"I reckon that's all she'll hold, Tex, and it seems to me we got enough grass on there to set fire to the whole dang' valley," he said at last. "Turn the wheels and let's get a-goin'."

Clive took the end of the tongue while the others got in close to the wagon and pushed mightily. Under their combined efforts it moved easily and began heading rapidly toward the house; rear end foremost.

A shout and a burst of shots apprised them that their ruse had been discovered, and soon bullets were splaying the wagon like hail, while wisps of hay, cut by the flying lead, soared from the piled up load and drifted gently to the ground. The body of the wagon and its towering load protected those behind it and they pushed their burden along steadily.

"The worst thing about this will be gettin' away from the house after we set this wagon on fire," opined Shad.

"I rather imagine we shall do some tall and fancy sidestepping if we dodge their bullets," agreed Ormsby.

With a crash that jarred them the wagon collided with the house. Clive had already deserted the tongue and joined the others, since the end of the pole was exposed to gunfire and bullets had begun to patter around it. Now, huddled close to the shelter of the vehicle, all drew matches and struck them on the under sides of their chaps.

As each match flared its holder reached up and tossed it into the hay. In a flash the dry and seasoned range grass turned into a raging inferno of towering flames and heat.

"It's every man for himself, now," Clive cried, and he started on a zigzagging run toward the corner of the house that had not come under fire of the guns of the Swinging J.

The others, forgetting their plan to scatter in different directions, followed him swiftly.

The end of the house they found, as they rounded it, to be blind, minus doors or windows. They were, therefore, as safe in its shelter as if they had been at home in their bunks at the Swinging J.

Bull Ellerby saw them there.

"We'll send some lead that-a-way, Tex, and yuh can chase this-a-way while they're a-duckin' our bullets," his heavy voice roared.

A sheet of flame burst from the bunkhouse and bullets sang against the walls of the ranch building, through windows and doors and all around. Under cover of this fusillade Clive and his companions dashed on a crooked run toward Ellerby. So effective was the Swinging J covering fire that those within the house were unable to plant a telling shot; the five made the bunkhouse unharmed.

BY NOW a great pillar of smoke was rising from behind the house and they knew the hay had set fire to the building. It would be a matter of only a short time until the occupants of the doomed building were forced to dash out.

"The rear—watch the rear!" Two-Gun cried suddenly.

"What do yuh see?" asked Clive.

"Nothin' yet, but them birds could go out that-a-way and get plumb off from us," Two-Gun answered.

On the instant Farrell dashed away. The firing from within the house had ceased as the flames became an angry menace. Clive sensed that efforts were being made to stifle the blaze, and he knew that this would be impossible: he turned

and followed Two-Gun, with Ormsby and Pink Sellers at his heels.

Gaining the cottonwoods, they scurried rapidly down toward the barn, pausing where they could obtain an unobstructed view of all the rear exits of the house. Men were tumbling through two rear doors. The remainder of the Swinging J raiders now hastened up, guns ready.

Over past the barn a drumming of hoofs sounded. Clive wondered if someone was approaching and voiced the question aloud to Two-Gun.

"Nope, Tex, that's somebody ridin' away from here hell-bent," Farrell responded, after listening. "I reckon some of them birds got out, lit on their hosses and are a-foggin' off across there to find help or make their getaway."

He lifted his weapons and sent a shower of bullets toward those who were fleeing from the house. A shouted order from Clive brought the remaining guns of the Swinging J into action; then the Diamond L outfit gave in.

Eleven men, including ancient and grizzled Cief Pence, ostensible owner of the ranch, threw down their guns and stood sullen and quiet while Clive walked up to them.

The doomed ranch-house was burning fiercely, the heat so intense that they were forced to move back nearly to the barn.

"Where's the girl, yuh damn old crow," Clive demanded, addressing Pence. "Tell me quick, afore I kick the livin', everlastin' daylights out of yuh."

Old Pence mouthed venomously, his scrubby chin whiskers bobbing like blades of wheat in a wind storm.

"I told yuh we didn't have no gal here. I reckon yo're a-goin' to pay a heap o' money for burnin' muh house, too. I'll have the law on yuh for this if it's the last thing I ever do."

Clive, beside himself with worry and fear for the safety of Forest, shoved the old scoundrel aside and dashed for the blazing building.

"Forest, Forest, Forest, are you in there?" he shouted.

Only the roar of the flames answered him. Two-Gun Farrell walked over to Pence and grasped him by the shoulders. His eyes bored into the sullen countenance of the Diamond L man.

"Tell me Pence; is the gal in that house?" he demanded.

Under the terrible menace in Two-Gun's face, Pence quailed and his own countenance went white.

"S'help me Godfrey, she ain't in that house," he mumbled in a low voice. "Yuh don't think I'd let anybody stay in a house and be burned up, do yuh?"

Truth was in his voice and showed in his eyes. Two-Gun dropped his hands from Pence's shoulders and hurried to where Clive was still calling frantically and endeavoring to find a way to enter the holocaust.

"Don't, Tex," he said gently, grasping Clive by the arm. "I reckon yo're a-barkin' up the wrong tree, old-timer. I'll stake muh life Miss Forest ain't in there. I just asked Pence, private-like, and he said she ain't. Don't ask me how I know, but I'm tellin' yuh he shore did speak the truth."

Clive turned grief-stricken eyes and haggard face to Farrell.

"Then, for God's sake, Two-Gun, tell me where she is?"

Two-Gun was in a quandary. Clive was on the verge of breaking down under the terrific strain he was enduring; not a physical breakdown, but a nervous reaction that might be worse. Farrell thought swiftly, seeking for something he might say to turn Clive's thoughts off on a new angle.

Like a flash he recalled the drumming hoofbeats they had heard; swiftly he had an inspiration. He looked sharply at Clive.

"I reckon they had her here, old-timer, but they got her away. Yuh remember them runnin' hosses we heard? Well, I betcha if we set out after 'em and ketch 'em we'll find yore gal, all top-side high and safe."

Gently he forced Clive back toward the others, talking to him soothingly, much as a mother might talk to her child. As they came back to where Shad, Bull and the rest were standing, Two-Gun saw Ormsby strike Pence a violent blow on the chin, then, as the old man fell prone, calmly extract a thick package of papers from his pocket and transfer it to his own. Ormsby gave Two-Gun a meaning look and Farrell immediately assumed charge of the situation.

"I reckon you Diamond L birds know we mean business by this time," he said. "Now, we're a-goin' to leave yuh here to do as yuh please, but if yuh'll take my advice yuh'll get out of the Cottonwood Valley. I reckon old Pence, there, can do as he pleases about stayin' or leavin'." He turned to the Swinging J riders. "Boys, I reckon we're a-goin' to hit it off toward

the hills after those hosses I heard a-runnin'.

Old Pence scrambled weakly to his feet and glared at Farrell.

"I hope yuh ketch 'em, then," he sneered. "That's Cougar Evans on one of them hosses and he'll shore pulverize anybody that tries to take him."

Evidently Pence had not missed the papers Ormsby had taken from his pocket, for he did not mention them. One of the Diamond L riders, however, had been more observant.

"When yuh had yore row with this bozo, Pence, and he socked yuh on the chin, I reckon he picked yore pockets while yuh was sorta knocked out like," he warned. "I saw him grab some papers outa yore coat."

Pence's face whitened swiftly and a look of terror came into his eyes as his hand swiftly sought his pocket and came away empty. Pleadingly he seized Ormsby's sleeve, all his bravado and insolence gone.

"Mister, for Lord's sake, don't take them papers!" he begged. "Honest, they ain't mine! My gosh, man, if yuh don't gimme 'em back I'll be killed; gimme 'em mister, and I'll never say a word about yore burnin' my bouse or nothin'!"

"Seeing that I took them from you forcibly, I promise you that in case there is anything in them that might incriminate you personally, I shall see you are not molested," Ormsby said quietly, unmoved by the other's plea.

For an instant Pence looked relieved; then he began again.

"But Henley'll have me killed; he'll—"

"Shut up, yuh damn fool," rasped a burly Diamond L rider. "Yo're a-talkin' too much."

Pence dropped his head, his face twisted in a hopeless grimace.

"I reckon I am," he muttered, then fell to snivelling and crying.

"Come on, we're a-goin' in the direction them bosses took," Two-Gun spoke up.

Ormsby had an inspiration. He drew Pence aside where the others could not hear.

"Listen, Pence," he said softly, "I know that you are one of the Henley lieutenants here in Cottonwood Valley. I believe the letters I took from you contain evidence that will help us to smash them. Now, if you will answer just one question, and answer truly, I promise you that you shall not be harmed in any way whatsoever, not even by the Henley crowd. What say?"

"What's yore question?" mumbled Pence, wetting his parched lips with his tongue.

"Was Miss Glade with Cougar Evans when he ducked from the burning house and rode off toward the hills?"

"I'm a-takin' yore word, mister, about them letters and my own welfare, and I'll answer yuh," the old fellow answered, after deliberating. "She was with him, shore enough, with a gag over her mouth and her hands tied behind her. Now, let me go."

Chapter XV

CLIVE TAKES THE TRAIL

ORMSBY immediately turned to Clive with his news.

"Old Pence says Cougar Evans has Miss Forest and that he rode away with her gagged and bound, headed back into the mountains. It's up to us to get her."

A terrible look came into Clive's face at Ormsby's words. It was as though his features had become a marble mask, so set they were, and his eyes held a glare none ever had seen there before. Swiftly Ormsby reached out, caught his hand and dropped a light forefinger on his raging pulse.

Clive jerked his free hand angrily.

"I ain't sick, Blaze," he said thinly.

Two-Gun was already assembling the Swinging J riders.

"I reckon we better get a-goin', boys, 'cause Cougar is gainin' on us every minnit we waste here," he cried.

"You fellers ain't goin' after Cougar, none of yuh!"

It was Clive's voice, sharp, clear, and dominant. The others looked swiftly toward him. His face had not changed its expression, save that the look in his eyes had become one of stony determination.

"I'm a-goin' after Cougar muhse'f; onderstand?" he went on. "Nobody's goin' but me. The rest of you fellers get back to the ranch and keep yore eyes on things. Don't expect me till yuh see me. I reckon I won't be back ontil I find Forest, and nobody knows where Cougar'll head with her."

"But Clive——" Ormsby began, then grew silent under a gesture from Clive.

"There ain't a bit of use argyfyin', Blaze. I'm a-goin' alone. I reckon

mebbe yuh don't understand how I feel about this, old-timer."

Ormsby dropped a friendly hand on Clive's shoulder.

"I reckon I do, old man. We'll go back to the ranch and we'll be waiting for you to show up with Miss Forest. Got plenty of shells?"

Clive nodded, already turning toward the rear of the bunkhouse where Thunder waited patiently.

Two-Gun came up to him, holding out his silver-mounted guns, butts first.

"Tex," he said, "ever since I had these weepins made to order there ain't never be'n nobody but me had a hand on 'em. They shoot straighter'n a crow flies at matin' time, boy. Take 'em with yuh. Yuh can't miss Cougar with 'em. Go on, Tex, take 'em." His voice was pleading.

Clive shook his head, lifting from its holster his own heavy .45 and spinning the cylinder.

"Nope," he said, "I thank yuh, Two-Gun, but I'm used to muh own baby. I'd like to have yuh along, you'and Blaze, but I feel I got to attend to this thing alone, now that I know where she's gone and that only Cougar's with 'er."

He swung into the saddle and turned Thunder's head toward Pence.

"Say, Pence," he said, his voice level and hard, "yuh got any idee where Cougar will head with that girl?"

"I s'pose he'll find his way into the Brindle Canyon country, down toward Mex, but 'less'n he's a-pointin' toward Brindletown, I can't say as I know where he'll fetch up."

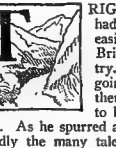
Brindle Canyon! To Clive it meant a vast region isolated from all the world by reason of its inaccessibility, a haven of frontier desperadoes, gamblers and killers. He had never been there, nor nearer to it than he was now, but strange tales about the place had reached even over into Texas, where he had heard them during his days as a Ranger. He straightened in his saddle, drew in his belt a notch, then touched his heel to Thunder's ribs. The black darted down the long row of cottonwoods, heading into the southeast, out and across the Diamond L. The others watched him out of sight; then all but six began the weary trek back toward the Swinging J. The six, a little sheepishly, followed slowly after Clive.

Brindle Canyon was somewhere off across the southeastern Mogollons. It was probably fifty miles from Cottonwood Valley, and, because of the terrific condition of the trails that led there, it was impossible to reach it in a single day's ride. At the best Clive could not figure how either he or Cougar Evans could find the heart of that vast region before noon of the following day, even though they were constantly in the saddle.

He saw no one during his rapid dash across the Bender ranch, but Sled Fogarty barred his progress with uplifted hand as he spurred onto the Circle C.

"I reckon yo're a-chasin' somebody, Morgan," Sled said. "If so, I can give yuh a tip. I seed some buzzard a-ridin' hell-bent into Trigger Gulch 'bout a hour ago when I was over that-a-way roundin' up some strays. Looked to me like he had somebody with 'im, too. Leastwise, he was a-leadin' a hoss with someone on it."

So Cougar was only an hour ahead. Clive thanked Sled swiftly and sped onward, across the Circle C.



TRIGGER GULCH, he had heard, was the easiest trail toward the Brindle Canyon country. If Cougar was going up the gulch, there was no doubt as to his ultimate destination. As he spurred ahead, Clive recalled vividly the many tales he had heard of the Brindle region—stories of a nest of outlaws who made the place their home; had, in fact, established a colony there with a saloon, a store and their private dwellings. It was as much as a man's life was worth to approach the place, unless he were known to at least three of the denizens.

Cougar, then must have an acquaintance with the rustlers and killers who infested the country. Perhaps it was his intention to take Forest there and then hold her for ransom, a ransom that easily could mean loss of the Swinging J. Perhaps his intentions toward her were even worse. At that thought, despite the rapid pace at which Thunder covered the ground, Clive felt he was being carried forward at a snail's pace. But he was too wise in horse lore and range lore to urge the black beyond his present efforts.

Growing cooler, he wondered if it would not have been better, after all, if he had brought his riders with him. If his journey ended in Brindle Canyon, or Brindletown itself he would need help, and need it badly. No man could stand alone against a town full of outlaws. His

versatile mind turned from plans of violence to scheming strategies that he could use in getting Forest out of Cougar's grasp.

If he could overtake Evans, all would be well; but Cougar had a start of an hour or more. That meant that, while the Swinging J man had another half hour of riding before he entered Trigger Gulch, Cougar was already in the confines of that narrow, jagged gash in the mountains, spurring toward the dividing summit, over which he would dash down toward the Brindle Canyon country.

Clive knew that Cougar, unless he were a fool, would be suspecting and expecting immediate pursuit; knew that Cougar, by the same token, would press forward without pause, killing the horses if need be to gain the region he was heading toward. Also, he knew that Cougar would be likely to blind his trail in order that pursuit might be misled; and, finally, he knew that for the time being Forest would be safe, because Cougar would not dare to halt now to threaten or molest her.

But Clive did not know that, stringing out behind him, far to the rear, but coming on easily were Two-Gun Farrell, Blaze Ormsby, Spud Garrett, Wyoming Red Hargrave, Bull Ellerby and Shad Stevens, the six who had failed to accompany the others on the trek back to the Swinging J.

They had decided that Clive should not make his way into the Brindle Canyon region alone; that it was foolhardy for him to try it, and that he should have help within immediate reach. But they knew he would be hurt and wrathful if he learned of their coming, so they were content to remain behind, out of earshot and eyesight, following his trail by picking up the signs he left as he traveled.

Thunder, spurning the ground, tore up great jagged patches of sand and stone-grit with his hoofs and Clive smoked innumerable cigarettes. Between the horse's tracks and Clive's burned cigarette stubs the trail was plain and there could be no losing it.

Entering Trigger Gulch, Clive let Thunder have his head. Despite the steep trail and the treacherous footing, the tireless black swept onward at amazing speed. Ten miles up the jagged defile Clive saw something white lying in the sand covered trail. He swooped in his saddle, never slackening speed, and picked it up.

It was a twisted piece of white cloth that evidently had once formed a portion of a table cover. From its size and the manner in which it had been folded, Clive arrived at once at the conclusion that this had been Forest's gag. Now that Cougar had her out of earshot and probably believed that pursuit was either far behind or had not yet started, the outlaw evidently had at least been merciful enough to free her of this painful bond.

Clive dropped the cloth in the trail, forgetting it almost instantly, but it served as a marker for Two-Gun and Blaze, telling them, as it did, that Clive and his quarry were still pushing onward, directly ahead.

By nightfall Clive had reached the summit southeast of Trigger Gulch and was gazing off across a vast, mysterious region of shadows and lights of painted peaks and jagged canyons—the entrance to Brindle Canyon itself. High up where he was, it still was light enough, and would be all the short Arizona night; but down below, where the trail pointed, it was too shadow-shrouded for anything to be distinguishable, though he sensed that somewhere ahead, perhaps not more than two or three miles distant, were Cougar and Forest.

He was now thirty miles from Cottonwood Valley and from now on the trail would be at times virtually impassable. If accounts reaching his ear in the past were true, much of his way he would make on foot, for it was said that there were places where no horse could go without constant danger of a slip that would send both animal and rider into oblivion; places, too, where the way was so steep that a horse could travel it only by virtue of a strong hand leading and coaxing it on. Gently he touched the black's side, and Thunder started easily down from the summit, heading into the shadows of the mysterious region below.

Constantly he watched ahead, hoping against hope that Cougar would stop for the night; hoping he would catch a glimpse of his quarry's campfire blazing upward through the blackness. But he saw nothing. Doggedly, unmindful of his intense weariness, forgetful of hunger or thirst, he forged ahead.

Two hours later he stopped at a tiny stream, brimming with icy water from the eternal snow-clad peaks far away. It was only when Thunder buried his nose in the cooling waters that Clive realized he himself was parched. Hating even to spare this small fraction of time, he swung from the saddle and dropped on his

stomach, a scant yard up-stream from the black, and drank. It came to him that he might be long in the saddle, so he took the canteen that all riders of the Arizona range carry at their saddles, emptied its luke-warm contents and refilled it with the sparkling, ice-cold water of the stream. Thunder raised his head, his velvety muzzle dripping, and champed his jaws lightly on the bit.

The going became hard. The trail suddenly ended in almost a blank wall. Up this Clive scrambled, talking gently to Thunder, coaxing him soothingly to the task of following. The willing black slid and pawed and dug his hoofs into the steep ascent, finally reaching the crest. Here the trail was no better. If anything, it was more treacherous. In the gloom of the semi-night, the way seemed to lead directly along a narrow ridge top. It was hardly more than a foot wide, with great, yawning chasms which disappeared in darkness on either side. Clive remained on foot, holding Thunder's reins. For an hour they traveled in this manner, then the ridge broadened to the semblance of a roadway and the going again became fair.

Clive found himself wondering how Cougar had managed to force Forest across this dangerous portion of the trail; his blood turned icy when he visioned her, still bound to the horse she was riding, exposed to this terrific ordeal, unable to help herself, or to protect herself if the horse slipped. It was another count in his score against Cougar Evans. Grimly, he rode onward.

ALL through the night, stumbling, sliding, fighting his way, he traveled, sometimes in the saddle, other times leading the black, but always going forward. Once or twice he believed he heard the sound of horses ahead, and on these occasions he strove desperately to hasten his progrss, but always he had been unable to run down his quarry.

Day dawned in the canyons and with the first clearing away of the mists Clive looked about him. He was deep in the fastnesses of the mountains; towering peaks stalked upward toward the heavens on all sides while the trail he was following clung precariously to a steep, jagged mountainside. The ground had a peculiar brindle color, even the stones and the gigantic boulders displaying the same hue. He was, then, in Brindle Canyon, and the end of his journey, consequently, could not be much further.

The trail was leading downward, still clinging to the side of the canyon. To his left was a yawning chasm, fully two thousand feet deep. Across from him was a perpendicular wall of brindle rock and stone. He wondered when he would catch sight of the outlaw nest he had heard about, and he speculated as to whether there actually was such a place. Somehow, he was inclined to doubt it, yet unless Cougar knew that food, water and shelter lay somewhere ahead in this vast, almost impenetrable region, he hardly would have headed this way with a girl on his hands.

Suddenly Clive heard a rumble of sound above him, pierced by the shrill scream of a girl.

"Clive, Clive, watch out!" she shouted.

Instinctively he pulled hard on the reins, throwing Thunder back on his haunches. At the same time he peered straight up the jagged, sloping wall that reared, impossible of ascent, above him.

A boulder was crashing downward, bounding high and ricocheting violently; in its wake came a cloud of lesser stones and dust. The murderous avalanche passed him, leaving him untouched. He had failed by a good forty feet to ride into its path.

But he had heard Forest's voice and, thrilled to the very core, he searched the rim of the wall above him. It was a good thousand feet to the top of that towering rampart.

"Here I am, Morgan; come and get me!" came a shout. Through the tomblike silence that followed the passage of the miniature avalanche.

To his right, and apparently on a trail far above him he now distinguished two figures—Cougar Evans and Forest Glade. Evans was waving a mocking hand at him.

"I misjudged, or that rock would've got yuh, Morgan," Cougar said, his voice carrying distinctly for all the great height from which it came. "Yuh missed fire on the trail, I see; I figgered yuh would. When yuh come across that narrer ridge way back there near the crick, yuh orta turned sharp to yore right 'stead of crossin' that razorback of rock. That's where I give yuh the slip. Yuh didn't know I was watchin' yuh back there, did yuh? I might 've shot yuh, but I was afeared of the light and didn't want to take no chances on missin'. Now, yuh can't get up here

and I reckon I'll be in Brindletown afore yuh get steered right ag'in. If yo're a-figgerin' on comin' there yuh better say yore prayers, cowboy, 'cause yuh'll never leave it alive."

Temporarily, Clive ignored Cougar.

"Forest dear, are yuh hurt?" he called anxiously.

"I am safe so far, Clive," her voice, clear and soft came back to him.

"Cougar," cried Clive, desperately, "if you will free Forest I will give you muh word that I'll not try to stop yuh from gettin' away."

"Go to hell, Morgan!" came the emphatic refusal. "I reckon this gal's worth a ranch and a pot of money to me and there's a sweet bunch of hell-benders over in Brindletown that'll help me to collect, too. Well, I'm shore sorry to have to leave yuh sudden like, but we got to be goin'. S'long."

He waved a flippant hand and, with Forest beside him, disappeared.

Clive knew that, had there been any manner in which he could have made the ascent of the canyon wall and gained the trail above Cougar would never have spoken to him. Unfamiliar as he was with the country, he felt a wave of despair rise in his heart. Somehow, he felt that he would save no time by riding back to the narrow ridge and taking the trail Cougar had followed from that point. He decided to ride ahead, trusting that he would find some other way of reaching the higher ground.

It occurred to him that Brindletown without doubt would be somewhere around a valley, near a supply of water. That being the case, the trail Cougar was following ought to lead downward soon, for the outlaw's settlement must now be very near. With more hope he rode onward.

The sun stood fairly overhead when the trail suddenly turned sharply to the right and stalked almost straight up the mountainside. Once more he was forced to alight and lead Thunder, aware of how futile it was to speculate on what the trails in this unknown region would prove to be. It was half an hour before he was successful in getting himself and his mount to the crest that had blocked his way.

Once here, outraged nature began to assert itself. Two nights and almost as many days in the saddle without food were beginning to tell on Clive. Despite himself he was forced to drop to the trail and rest. He swallowed great gulps of water from the canteen, then filled his high-crowned sombrero with the remainder and gave it to Thunder. In an hour he rose and swung into the saddle, somewhat rested, but fighting desperately against the urge to sleep which tugged at his eyelids.

At two o'clock he rounded a jutting spire in the trail and drew rein. A deep, broad valley opened before him, into which the trail seemed to lead. Thousands of cattle and a few sheep dotted the green enclosure, but there was, apparently, no house nor other sign of life.

Puzzled, he glanced about him in all directions and then, far up the side of the mountain, five miles distant across the valley, he saw a cluster of 'dobe huts and a scattering of tents, the whole surrounded by a stockade. The place was built on an in-shooting bench in the mountainside and to reach it it was necessary to follow a tortuous upward trail from the valley. The place was a veritable Gibraltar.

"Brindletown," Clive said to himself, "and all hell couldn't get into it, I reckon."

A cluster of choke-cherries beckoned to him and he rode among them, pulling off handfuls of the tart, puckery fruit and munching greedily. His thoughts, made thrice alert because of his nervous tension and loss of sleep, worked rapidly.

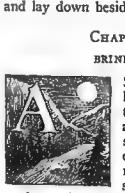
"There ain't a bit o' use tryin' to get into that place from the bottom, 'specially in daylight. Seems to me the sensible thing to do is wait till it's dark, then work round and above it and see if there's any trail from that direction. They won't hurt Forest yet, I reckon, 'cause, if Cougar's a-figgerin' on gettin' ransom for her, he'll shore be a-waitin' to take good care of her for the time bein'."

He dropped the saddle and bridle from the black and, making a pillow of them threw himself beneath the choke-cherries and closed his eyes.

It was there, two hours later, that six tired-eyed riders found him, and without waking him turned loose their own mounts and lay down beside him.

Chapter XVI

BRINDLETOWN



SHUDDERING, ululating wail shattered the silence of the valley and Clive sat up with a start, staring about him dumbly until memory returned like a flash to sear him with renewed anxiety. A white, glittering moon was al-

most directly overhead and with a reproachful groan he looked at his watch. It pointed to one o'clock—and he had been asleep since the middle of the afternoon.

"Dang my ornery, no-account, lazy hide," he rasped savagely as he gained his feet. "Here I be'n a-sleepin' like a no good yaller dog. If that c'yote hadn't 'a' let out that blast I reckon I'd be'n a-sleepin' till——"

His voice died as his eyes, now fully awake and alert to the scene about him, fell on a number of horses that were grazing calmly beneath the choke-cherries, near the spot where Thunder was nibbling daintily.

Then for the first time he became aware of the slumbering forms sprawled about him at random points beneath the trees. Grimly he stared at them, dark anger contracting his brow; then his face softened.

He called softly to the sleeping men and with prodigious yawns and stretches they came to their feet. All save Two-Gun and Blaze were shamefaced at first, but Clive speedily made them aware of how welcome they were.

"My cripes, I'm so hongry I could just nacherally chaw the tail off'n a mad he-wolf," plaintively. wailed Wyoming Red.

"Hunh, I'm hongrier'n that," avowed Spud. "Me, I could eat the cherries right off'n my grandmaw's old straw bonnet this very minute. By cripes, we got to get somethin' purty soon or I'm goin' down in that valley, shoot me a steer and have muhse'f a steak if I'm hung for a cow-thief the next minute."

"I reckon we'll all be goin' down there in a jiffy," said Clive. "I don't know whether you fellers saw it or not, but I sized up that there Brindletown from here, and to reach her we got to cross this valley and get up that mounting over yonder. There ain't no such thing as gettin' in the place, either, 'less'n yuh got a army or a ton of dynamite with yuh. From what I be'n able to see, it 'pears to me our best bet lays above that place, on the rim of the overhangin' wall."

"Two-Gun thinks that if we make the heights back of the town we may be able to find a way down into it, though it probably will be dangerous," Ormsby replied.

"Meantime, I'm as hungry as all these others combined, and I'm going to rustle myself some grub. There are sheep down in that valley, so let's go down and have mutton for dinner."

Two hours later, in a tiny gully that stalked back into the mountain, they dined on mutton, tender, but ungarnished and unseasoned; to their ravenous appetites it was food fit for kings. The meal ended and their stomachs satisfied the towering mountain that held Brindletown and the outlaws' nest itself did not look half so formidable or awesome as it had two hours earlier.

They crossed the valley with caution and for the first time since he had come to Arizona Clive was bitter against the brilliant, low-hanging moon. Fearing that it would reveal them to watchful eyes in Brindletown, they were unusually careful in making their way through the five-mile width of lush grass to the foot of the mountain on the other side. Once there, however, they believed they had been unobserved, though they could not, of course, be certain.

"I reckon there never was a hoss that could climb up there, and me, I'm a-goin' to let mine stay here and graze his fool head off," said Two-Gun, dropping lightly from his mount. "We'll have to climb that jasper on foot, that's all."

The others realized the truth of Two-Gun's assertion and stripped their horses before staking them out. Clive and Two-Gun led the way up the side of the mountain.

"We got to get off'n this trail and dodge Brindletown on the way up, and she shore is goin' to be hell when we hit them straight up and down places 'way up there in the air," he observed, dubiously scanning the heights above.

For an hour they toiled upward, struggling often to maintain footing, but eventually they found themselves on a level with Brindletown, and somewhat to the right of the place. The hardest part of their task now confronted them.

The mountain at this point became almost a sheer wall, marred and scarred in a thousand and one places by the action of wind and weather. It was to these myriads of tiny crevices that they owed their eventual success, for, by using these gashes for foot and hand holds and by taking frequent rests, they finally pulled themselves over the rim of the wall and threw themselves flat, gasping. Life came back to their worn and strained bodies slowly and it was some little time before they felt fit to set out for whatever might lie ahead.

DAWN was streaking the eastern skies before they recovered their wind. They crept along the rim of the towering hanging wall until they judged they were fairly above Brindletown; then Clive stuck his head over the edge. The others joined him.

Brindletown lay a thousand feet below them. It consisted of a dozen 'dobe huts, four or five tents and a half-'dobe, half-tent structure larger than any of the other buildings; judging by its central location and its evident importance, it was a sort of general headquarters for the gang that infested the nest. Rumor had said the rustlers had a saloon and general store, but this evidently was not true.

Around the buildings on three sides was a 'dobe wall, formed in the nature of a stockade. A spring gushed from a clump of small trees at one end of the stockade. The fourth side of the place was protected by the wall of the mountain. Quickly every man of the Swinging J outfit realized that the only way they possibly could get into Brindletown was to fly—or slide down a thousand-foot rope.

As they watched they saw signs of life beginning to stir below. Figures emerged from the huts and converged on the large central structure. They saw a man mount the wall and apparently gaze off toward the valley, as though he were using a field-glass.

Other figures appeared and moved toward the large structure. After a time it seemed the entire populace must have converged there.

"Two-Gun," Ormsby murmured, "What do you suppose would happen if I were to empty my six-gun down into Brindletown?"

"Nothin' much, I don't reckon," Farrell responded. "The man don't live that could shoot worth a damn aimin' a thousand feet downward, and yore six-gun wouldn't do no damage, 'less it was by accident. I reckon mebbe we could pester 'em and like as not make 'em keep under cover, but that wouldn't do us no good nor get us no results. Nope, we got to figger out somethin' besides six-guns from where we're a-settin'."

Clive looked around toward them, an inspiration in his eyes.

"Then, Two-Gun, what do yuh s'pose would happen if I was to heave a boulder down there?" he asked.

Two-Gun thwacked his thigh with a heavy palm.

"Yuh got a idee now that beats everything else all holler," he cried. "That shore is the ticket, but we want to be shore we ain't a-heavin' no rocks at the house where Miss Forest is bein' cooped up."

"I don't reckon she's in that big one," said Clive thoughtfully, "and I betcha I can take a fifty-pound rock and peg that place plumb center, first try."

"Then do it, and don't talk no more about it," said Spud, his fiery, pugnacious nature yearning for action and chafing at their delay. "If yuh don't, by cripes, I will."

Ormsby raised a hand.

"Wait," he said. "I think we shall learn right now where Miss Forest is sheltered."

They looked downward, following his pointing finger, and saw Forest led from a hut at the extreme lower end of Brindletown and into the larger structure. Clive turned to the others.

"I reckon we ain't a-goin' to get anywhere onless we start somethin', and while they got Forest in there let's figger this thing out. S'posin' I'd heave about a dozen of these rocks down there and stampede that crowd. What'd happen?"

"Any damn fool can answer that, cowboy," grinned Spud, "and this 'n 'll do it. Them fellers would skedaddle hell-bent down that trail and into the valley if their houses started tumblin' around 'em."

"Ezackly," said Clive, "and while they was a-runnin' we'd be a-settin' up here like a bunch of old women at a quiltin' bee, and them jaspers 'd get clean away."

Ormsby nodded, following Clive's thought closely.

"All of which means we got to get some system to this," Clive resumed. "Now, here's my idee. I figger one man can roll so many of them boulders down into Brindletown that he can drive out their whole gang. I don't reckon there is more 'n twenty or mebbe twenty-five. Well, that's more 'n we can mebbe tackle successful like, but rather 'n have their town all smashed up they might be willin' to trade Forest, or let her meander down that mountain by her lonesome, where we could pick her up. Anyhow, regardless of that, I reckon while one of us rolls boulders the other six can work down where we can pot-shot that trail sort of easy like and make life a reg'lar little hell for them birds when they come pilin' out that gate in the 'dobe wall."

"I figgers yo're the brains of this crowd after all, Tex," opined Two-Gun.

"Don't shoot yore compliments too quick, Two-Gun. S'posin' they start to hurtin' Forest to get even with us? Then what?"

"That is a contingency we must take care of when it arrives, Clive," broke in Blaze. "Right now, the thing to do is start the ball rolling. Jut as soon as they take Miss Forest back to her hut we can act. Now let me amplify your plan."

"If that means yo're a-goin'" to help it like, shoot," responded Clive.

Ormsby smiled.

"One of us remains here. The rest will work downward to points along the trail, and, when they are set and ready, the one who remains here will start to roll the boulders. If it happens that they all crowd into the building holding Forest, in the knowledge that we will not harm her, the only thing left for us to do is besiege them. We are out; they are in. We can live indefinitely on the cattle and sheep in the valley. Sooner or later they will be starved into giving up. If, as we suspect, they start down the mountain toward safety, every mother's son of us must get at least two men, and get them *pronto!* That will cut them down nearer to our own strength if it comes to a shoot-out."

"Who's a-goin' to stay here and chuck the stones?" asked Shad.

"You are," said Clive promptly.

"Like hell, I am!" rasped Shad. "I'm a-goin' down there where I can sling lead. I ain't no shuck: at throwin' stones, anyhow."

"I reckon yo're a-figgerin' mebbe I'll do the honors with them rocks," sarcastically cut in Spud Garrett. "Well, I ain't, and that's that. I'm a-goin' down where there's a chance to see some action, that's me."

"Well, none of yuh need try wishin' the job on me," warned Wyoming Red.

"Only one way to settle it, boys," said Blaze Ormsby. He picked up a handful of splintered shale from the ground and carefully selected seven pieces, which he placed in his sombrero and held above his head.

"There are seven small stones in my hat," he said. "One has a tiny white streak through it. The man who picks out the stone with the white streak stays here and rolls the boulders. That fair?"

"I reckon so," conceded Spud, and drew the first stone.

"Yipee-e-e-e," he cried. "She's brindle as hell; ain't a white spot on 'er."

Two-Gun, Clive and Wyoming Red each drew brindle stones; then Bull Ellerby drew forth the one with the white streak. He cast it aside with a curse, then looked about him.

"Well, I'm 'lected, I reckon, but afore the rest of you buzzards go down there for the soft end of this game, yuh got to help me roll my ammynition into place."

In ten minutes the seven had piles of boulders, varying in weight from fifty to two hundred pounds, perched along the rim of the wall at points of vantage.

"Now," said Clive, wiping the moisture from his brow with a calloused forefinger, "yuh'll be able to see us most of the time and after we get set yuh can start yore ball a-rollin' whenever yuh dang' please. Only, be careful that yuh don't get one o' them stones on that hut where Forest is, or near her in case they bring her out and make a run for it."

Bull flexed the muscles in his powerful arms and turned to look over the rim, gauging the distance.

"Yuh can trust me, I reckon," he said, and Clive was satisfied.

AS the others made their way down the wall, Bull sought a club to use as a lever and finally tore one from the butt of a dead palo verde. With this in hand and his primitive ammunition ready, he waited until he saw two men lead Forest from the central building and take her back to her hut.

Far below, and toward his left, he made out scattered dots that crouched behind jagged outcroppings in the wall; the six from the Swinging J were in their places. He walked to a two-hundred pound boulder and thrust his club under it, lifting gently. Carefully he gauged the amount of force he wished to put behind it, then heaved mightily.

Like a meteor the heavy boulder hurtled downward, touching no portion of the wall as it dropped. But Bull had not given it quite the start he had intended and it fell a little short of the large structure, which was his mark. With a roaring crash, the stone dropped squarely in the thoroughfare that spanned the outlaws' nest.

Hardly had it struck before another and lighter boulder was on its way. Bull had seen the other was falling short and now, seizing a fifty-pound rock in his

brawny arms he lifted it high above his head and cast it straight out from him, watching with fascinated eyes as it dropped.

Fairly and squarely on the very edge of the roof it struck, crashing through the central building as though the structure had been built of paper. It hurtled among the ranks of the startled occupants, who were tumbling outside as the result of the first dinning crash in the street. Ruin and death followed, for the boulder and the flying débris crushed the life out of three outlaws and completely demolished the front of the house.

Close behind followed another light stone, sent forth with all the strength of Bull Ellerby's mighty arms. It crashed through in the wake of its predecessor and two more men fell victims. Then the outlaws scattered, the sounds of their startled yells and cries reaching clearly to the canyon rim.

Warm with his efforts and his blood tingling with the success of his work, Bull now began to heave stones with methodical precision, dropping stones into the street and allowing the rebound from the hard earth to wreck the huts, careful only that no stone fell near the shack wherein Forest was confined.

The outlaws made a pellmell dash for the gate and crashed through, storming out onto the trail, where they paused and looked upward. Bull tried to reach them with a twenty-pound stone, but his effort succeeded only in making a gap in the 'dobe wall. Seeing this, the outlaws now stood their ground, convinced that he was powerless to hurt them further.

Arms were lifted and pointed; Bull could tell that the men below were discussing him, no doubt taking him for Clive, and already planning how best to storm the canyon wall and either drive him off or kill him. He chuckled at what evidently was their surprise over the method of attack, over this disillusionment that came with the ending of a dream of security in Brindletown. Calmly Bull heaved another stone. He saw it strike the hut next to the one that quartered Forest, and crash through the roof in a cloud of dust.

Suddenly two figures ran into the roadway. Bull recognized them instantly, and paused. It was Forest, and Cougar Evans was dragging her toward the 'dobe wall. Bull cursed him heartily, and held his fire temporarily, unwilling to risk Forest's life among the débris that flew in all directions when a stone crashed.

Several men left the trail and started for the wall, as though preparing to storm up the treacherous place and attack him. Bull wondered what Clive and the others were doing, and why they had not gone into action. He was answered almost on the instant.

A spattering of shots and slumping figures among the outlaws showed that the fight was on. The outlaws, surprised for a second time, stood temporarily at a loss. Then as another blast from the Swinging J riders cut into their ranks they opened a furious bombardment on the boulders that sheltered Clive and the others.

Bull could see Cougar Evans, still clinging to Forest, hastening down the trail into the valley. The gunman was aware, of course, that none of the riders from the Swinging J would fire where he might hurt the girl.

"Hell's bells!" groaned Bull. "After all our work is that damn' c'yote a-goin' to get away with her ag'in'?"

It seemed so, for while the fight in the trail continued to wax hot Cougar and Forest kept on downward toward the valley. The girl was resisting, but her captor was dragging her along.

From their shelter behind the rocks the Swinging J men were playing havoc in the ranks of the outlaws and the latter, sensing that while they had the benefit of numbers their plight was hopeless, beat a hasty retreat back inside the 'dobe walls. Bull, watching, prepared to rout them out again with more boulders.

As he straightened up, a rock in his powerful hands, he saw a form streak down the trail in the wake of Cougar and Forest; saw the figure leaping recklessly ahead, despite the fact that a slip or a misstep at high speed would precipitate him into a chasm and land his shattered body a thousand feet below. Bull recognized the leaping, running form.

"That's Tex," he told himself. "He's a-goin' after Cougar, and I bet a dollar ag'in a horned toad's toe-nails he gets him this time." He sent his boulder flying downward.

Three quick shots sounded and Bull realized it was a signal. Looking downward he could make out someone beckoning him below. Thankfully, he seized one more boulder, hurled it and watched it scatter the outlaws at the gate. Then he calmly set about tilting as many stones over the rim at one time as he could.

The effect was startling. Like an ava-

lanche they roared downward, carrying part of the wall with them.

Grimly Bull set about the task of joining those below.

"Tex is streakin' it for Cougar and the gal," Two-Gun greeted him. "We're a-goin' to get our hosses and try to pick 'em up."

CHAPTER XVII

DRAW!

CLIVE followed Cougar Evans down the hill without thought of the bullets that streamed after him from the outlaws crouching behind the shattered 'dobe wall. He gave no heed to the treacherous footing of the trail. Evans had only a short start, and he was handicapped by Forest's frantic resistance. Clive was positive that the time had finally come when he and Cougar would have it out, and the thought fired his blood as nothing else had ever done.

Ahead of him, only a short distance, he glimpsed the pair, Evans still running swiftly and jerking the girl along cruelly. Clive knew he was gaining, and gaining rapidly. As nearly as he could judge, he would catch them just about where the trail came out into the valley and left the mountain. He increased his efforts.

Once Cougar looked back; he saw that Clive was catching up with him. Immediately he strove to increase his own pace. Rapidly the bottom of the mountain drew near and in another five minutes Clive would surely catch up with them. Cougar, looking back a second time, seemed suddenly to realize this.

He raised his arm, clenched his fist and deliberately struck the girl on the point of the jaw, felling her and knocking her completely unconscious. Thus freed of his hampering burden, he bounded ahead at increased speed, sure that the girl's plight would halt his pursuer and give him ample time in which to escape.

Clive reached Forest's side and with a little moan of anguish gathered her in his arms. Her face was white and a blue lump was swelling rapidly where the fist of Cougar had landed. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing feebly. Frantically he worked with her, calling to her in endearing terms.

Thus they were when the others reached them. Ormsby calmly thrust Clive aside while he bent over Forest. Quickly he examined her.

"The damn brute knocked her cold," he said, after a moment.

Ormsby's hand was holding hers and his forefinger was touching her pulse as he spoke. He smiled up into Clive's anxious eyes.

"Don't worry, old man," he said softly. "She isn't hurt—on my word."

"Then I'm a-goin' to get Evans." Clive rose to his feet, grim resolve in every line of his features. "Take care of her, Blaze, and don't let her out of yore sight. Make it straight for the ranch. I reckon I'll breeze in that-a-way later; but just now I've got somethin' to attend to and I'm a-follerin' Cougar if I have to chase him clean down into Mexico. S'long."

He was off. Evans, he knew, had gained a respite by knocking out Forest. By this time he probably had saddled a horse and was streaking away. Clive strove to calm his racing thoughts and stopped deliberately in the trail while he looked about. Then he saw a movement below him, and to his left. It was Evans, on a horse heading south.

Far off the mountains rose up like a wall on all sides, save for a single gash almost fairly in the middle of the valley's end. Three minutes later Clive mounted on Thunder was racing after Cougar.

Now began a chase that was destined to live in the annals of the West for years; for Cougar had taken for his mount a stolen animal that had won fame far and near for endurance and speed. Try as he would Clive did not seem to be able to close the gap between them. Three miles apart they swept gustily into the mountains and stormed up toward the pass that opened through to the south. All day long they rode, on and on, through the pass and down the southern side of the slope.

Night came on and found them still riding, little change in the distance that separated them. At midnight Clive saw the lights of a tiny mining camp. He paused briefly before the open door of a saloon and hailed a miner who stood outside.

"Did yuh see a hombre foggin' through here lately, old-timer, like he was tryin' to beat all hell a-gettin' somewheres?"

"I reckon I did," came the answer. "He must've planned on goin' some distance, too, 'cause he stopped long enough at the Chink's place to grab a piece of beef and some bread. Yuh after 'im?"

Instead of answering, Clive waved a

friendly, thankful hand and touched his heels to Thunder's ribs. At dawn he followed Cougar's own lead and bought food at a restaurant in still another mining camp, then, after watering Thunder lightly, urged the game animal ahead.

"I reckon if we don't come in sight of him by noon, old hoss, I'll stop long enough for yuh to get some eats and take a breathin' spell," he promised. "He can't keep a-goin' forever on that hoss of his 'thout restin' him, neither, and yuh ain't never seen one yet that could beat yuh at the long distance game." He rubbed the black's neck with an affectionate, soothing hand.

At ten o'clock he was out of the southern slope of the mountains and crossing a cattle ranch. At the ranch-house he found a large, blooded horse, head drooping, quivering, almost dead on his feet.

"I just got that hoss traded me for a piece of crow-bait that a geezer said he wanted; feller that come in a-ridin' hellbent," a grizzled foreman told Clive. "Now, I reckon yo're a-chasin' him."

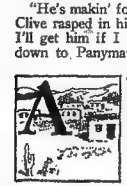
"Which way 'd he go?" Clive asked.

"He was headin' south. Like as not yuh'll run onto him in Sigsbee, 'bout forty mile from here. I don't reckon that hoss I traded him will carry him any further 'n that."

Clive rested Thunder at the ranch until three in the afternoon. Five hours he allowed the black, and five only; then he was in the saddle again. Despite the terrific race Thunder had made the previous day and night, he seemed to have recovered fully, and at nightfall Clive rode into Sigsbee.

He found Cougar had arrived only three hours earlier and had lost a precious hour finding another horse. Finally, he had been able to pick up one and, with a two-hour lead, was off once more, still heading south.

"He's makin' for Mexico, shore as hell," Clive rasped in his parched throat. "Well, I'll get him if I have to foller him clear down to Panymaw."



T nightfall, two days later, Clive rode into a nondescript little town set squarely on the international boundary. He had traced Cougar without once having missed the trail, and so far Evans had used five different horses. Thunder's ribs now stood out under a coat that had been a soft, velvety black but which had become a gray mud formed from a mixture of lathery sweat and dust. His head drooped, but his heart was still willing and, had Clive urged, Thunder would have continued to carry on until he dropped in his tracks.

Clive was anxious now about Thunder's welfare and was considering leaving the horse in this place, while he either bought or hired another animal with which to continue the race. But he was saved the trouble.

A wizened bald-headed man watched him ride up to the tie-rack in front of a building labeled "International Saloon." As Clive dismounted this man advanced chuckling.

"I'll bet a dollar I can tell what you are doing here, mister," he said. "You are after a fellow who rode in here about two hours ago. Aren't you, now?"

Immediately Clive grasped him, recognizing his type—an Easterner, down on his luck and degenerated into a typical saloon rat. His was a familiar figure in the border cities and towns.

"There's a double-eagle in it for you if yuh tell me where to find that feller," he said.

The other looked crestfallen.

"He's in town, mister, but I don't know where," he admitted. "This is Golfornia, you know, and half of it is in Mexico. Likely as not, he's on the other side now. I don't imagine he left here; his horse was all in, and there aren't any for sale in this man's town. Those who have horses here hang onto them in case they have to leave in a hurry. Say, this is a bad town, mister."

Impatiently, Clive thrust a gold-piece in the fellow's hand.

"What do you mean it's bad?" he asked.

"What, just what I said. Digger Wade, Three-Finger Smith and a lot more gunmen run this place and there's a shooting here at least twice a week. If the bird you are after is a friend of these fellows you better watch yourself. You'll be bumped off *pronto*."

The man hurried away and Clive whistled softly. The men the old fellow had named were well known all over the West as gunmen and desperadoes. If Cougar Evans was their friend—and he must be, else why had he come here—then Clive had his task cut out for him.

Cougar, Clive realized fully, was afraid of the Swinging J foreman. He had proved this by his mad flight. Possibly

memories of what had happened to Coldwater, Clem Jacobs and others of the Cottonwood Valley rustlers had inspired this fear, but at any rate it was genuine. Therefore, unless Cougar felt that he was safe here from Clive's vengeance, he assuredly would have continued on into Mexico and made good his escape into the vast, mysterious reaches of the land below the Rio Grande.

Clive turned Thunder's head and swung lightly into the saddle.

"I reckon I'm in for it, old hoss," he told the intelligent animal. "Cougar just naturally yanked me into a trap here, it seems, and it begins to look as if I might have to shoot muh way out. But that ain't a-goin' to keep me from makin' you comfortable, old-timer."

An hour later he left the livery stable, having seen Thunder thoroughly rubbed down, fed, bedded and given water. He walked cautiously along the single street of the place, through the middle of which ran the international line. A man might stand in Mexico, shoot him down in the United States, and get away before the combined town authorities could act; but that was a chance he felt he had to take.

He wondered where Cougar was keeping himself, and when he reached the first saloon on the American side of the line he looked cautiously within. Cougar was not there; neither were any of the gunmen Clive had been warned against, for the Swinging J rider would have recognized all of them from former experiences while still a Ranger. Up the entire length of the American side he worked a careful way, sheltered by the gloom, but in none of the half-dozen saloons he visited did he find trace of Cougar. Crossing the street to the Mexican side, he started back along the line of straggling buildings. He felt that here, if at all, he would find his man. And he did.

In the Golfornia Emporium he saw Cougar. Two men were with him, drinking and laughing. But Evans was not laughing. He looked worn and haggard, strained and tired. His companions Clive recognized instantly. They were Three-Finger Smith, and Digger Wade. Three-Finger was a notorious Texas gunman, and Digger was an outlaw who had piled his craft successfully in both the Territories of Arizona and New Mexico.

Clive drew his .45 and spun the cylinder. It worked smoothly, and he dropped the gun back in its holster, drew his belt a notch tighter and squared his shoulders. He hooked his right thumb in his belt, letting his left hand hang low and wide at his side. Thrusting open the swinging, shoulder-high door, he stepped inside.

Three-Finger Smith saw him immediately but stood quietly watching. He said something in a low voice to Cougar and the latter whirled swiftly. His face went the color of marble as his eyes met Clive's. Swiftly Digger Wade dropped in beside him, while Three-Finger maintained his original position.

"You're here, are ye?" rasped Cougar, his eyes flaring with hate and a sudden lust to kill. He seemed to take courage in the proximity of the two gunmen.

"Yes, Evans, I'm here," said Clive, his voice level and cold. "I reckon yuh got some of yore friends with yuh, but that don't make no difference between me and you. I said I'd get yuh and I'm here to keep my word. Draw, damn yuh!"

Digger Wade was the first to move. His white, womanly hand flashed for his gun. Clive had watched coolly, fully aware that he faced not Evans's gun alone, but three of the fastest gun-throwers in the West. He had a feeling that he was about to die, yet he was not sorry. He was dying to avenge the woman he loved, the woman Evans had kidnapped, brutally dragged through the tortures of hell, then had deliberately struck in the face with his fist. He saw Digger move and sensed that Cougar and Smith also were going into action.

Clive's hand dropped and he used an old-time gunman's trick that Two-Gun Farrell had taught him. His six-gun never left its holster. Instead, the butt of his gun was forced downward and the barrel automatically forced upward. His holster had no bottom and the naked end of the barrel had paralleled his thigh. Now, as the holster tilted and the barrel came up, the muzzle roared, and kept on roaring.

Digger's gun never got quite half-way up. It was, in fact, barely out of its holster when Clive's bullet struck him. Throwing up his hands, Digger fell forward on his face. His fall saved Clive's life, for his body lurched against Cougar as the latter fired and the bullet meant for Clive went through the hat of Three-Finger Smith, disconcerting the latter, who also was going for his gun.

Cougar's gun roared twice, and at each crashing report Clive's solidly-planted body shook; then a tiny hole seemed to leap out squarely between Cougar's eyes.

Evans dropped, sprawling his length across Wade.

Clive's third bullet struck Three-Finger in the shoulder and the latter spun heavily, sitting down and dropping his gun, the while he snarled curses. Then Three-Finger Smith fired, and Clive's knees buckled under him. He was dropping, but even as he fell his gun left its holster, now clear for all to see, and snapped upward. It roared once, twice, and Three-Finger slipped to the floor.

FOR the whole affair to transpire had taken less than three seconds. Clive hit the floor gently and his shoulders sagged against the wall. Wearily he looked about him, suddenly feeling old and tired, noting the startled awe with which those who were assembled there gazed at him from their points of safety about the room.

"If anybody shoots at that bozo ag'in, he settles with me, and it's Big Tim Riley as says it," a voiced suddenly yelled.

Clive saw a giant of a man stride out from behind the bar, gun in either hand. As he passed the three bodies on the floor he spurned Three-Finger with his foot, then took his stand squarely in front of Clive, looking down at him.

"I don't know who yuh be, mister," he said warmly "but any hombre that can shoot hell out of Cougar Evans, and Three-Finger Smith and put Digger Wade on the sick list all at one settin' is shore a man after my own heart, and I'm backin' yore play as she lays, regardless of what she's all about."

"Then I reckon yuh better see how bad I'm busted up," Clive said with a wan smile, feeling suddenly weak.

Then he was aware of another figure beside him, the wizened little man who had talked with him when he had first ridden in to Golfornia. The man's fingers were running beneath his shirt with a touch somehow suggestive of the physician.

"I used to be a doctor," he said in a low voice. "Let me see your hurts."

Swiftly he ripped open Clive's shirt, revealing to the onlookers where three bullets had struck him. One had caught him in the left arm, plowing through the bunched biceps; another had struck him in the shoulder, too high to be dangerous, but one of them, probably the last, threatened to have dangerous consequences. It had plowed into Clive's neck and had left a jagged, gaping wound, a little to the right of the windpipe, and barely missing the artery.

In a little while the wizened man stood up. He took swift command of the situation.

"Your arm won't bother you much, and that wound in your shoulder isn't at all dangerous, but that shot in the neck means you must go to bed and stay there. It's bad, cowboy, and I'm not over-sanguine about it. Think you can——"

His voice died out for he saw Clive's eyes close and his face go white. Instantly the little man became all action. He turned to Big Tim Riley.

"I heard you say you were backing this man's play, Tim," he cried. "If that is so, get someone to help me put him to bed. Have others fetch plenty of water—hot and cold—and I'll need clean bandage cloths. Tell someone to run to my tent and get a little black satchel they'll find under my bed. Haven't used anything out of it for years, but I've got to do my best or this man'll die. Hustle, now, or he'll cash in right here."

Big Tim caught the little man's spirit and his great, bellowing voice roared through the room, sending men scurrying in a half dozen directions. He bent over to assist in picking Clive from the floor, then felt strong hands seize him and literally hurl him aside, while two men fell on their knees beside Clive and exclaimed with hot voices.

One gazed at the fallen Swinging J foreman with tiny green lights flaring in his eyes. The other was calm of face and manner; handsome, with black, crisp hair and smooth hands. He was going at Clive's wounds much the way the little man had done, except that his touch seemed more skillful, more sure, and his manner more confident. Big Tim looked down at them, a hot question on his lips.

"What are you fellers doin' to that gent?" he demanded. His ham-like hands were swaying near his guns.

The man with the greenish eyes looked up, his gaze fairly burning into the big man.

"I reckon we're a-goin' to take care of this feller," he answered in a metallic voice, "and after we get him fixed up proper like we're a-goin' to find the dirty skunks that shot him, and I reckon we'll find 'em if we have to clean out this man's town from end to end and sideways."

"There ain't nobody for yuh to clean

out, mister," said Big Tim, relief in his voice that Clive was with friends. "That feller, him, he jest nacherally ruined Cougar Evans, Three-Finger Smith and Digger Wade. Shucks, that feller's hell-fer-breakfast with a six-gun and I don't reckon he needs no help 'cept to get hisself fixed up, and Doc Wattles is 'tendin' to that."

The other stood up.

"Yuh can tell Doc Wattles we got a reg'lar doctor here now. That's Blaze Ormsby there, and he's a A 1 doc, too, but I reckon yore doc can help him some. Me, I'm Two-Gun Farrell and from right now through all the rest of the way this here feller's fight is mine and I'm here to finish any leetle thing he may have left unfinished."

"I've heard of yuh," nodded Riley. "Yuh used to be a Ranger over Texas way. Well, I'm this gent's friend, too, and yuh can bet yore uncle's pants there ain't no fight left here ag'in yore pard. Here comes that geezer with Doc Wattles's satchel."

Ormsby seized on the little man's bag of surgical instruments with avid hands and supervised the removal of Clive to a room on the second floor of the Emporium. Already the bodies of the dead men had been carried out, while Wattles, now that Ormsby had assumed charge of Clive's case, had turned his attention to Digger Wade.

An hour later Clive regained consciousness and gazed into the anxious eyes of Two-Gun Farrell and the smiling, hopeful face of Blaze Ormsby. Not far behind them stood Big Tim Riley, apparently as anxious as either Blaze or Two-Gun.

Clive tried to speak, and even as he found he could not, Blaze laid a warning finger on his lips.

"No talking, Clive," he said in a low, soothing voice. "You aren't going to cash in, old-timer. Right now, you are to lie there and keep quiet. Now, see if you can sleep."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE RUSTLERS DEPART

CLIVE'S wounds were more serious than Blaze had hinted and for a week he tossed in the throes of delirium; then his splendid body threw off the death shadows that had hovered about it, and he began to mend. At the end of the third week Blaze declared him entirely out of danger and said that another two weeks in bed would find him with sufficient regained strength to make the return trip to the Swinging J.

At the end of a month Ormsby announced that Wattles could drop in daily and take care of Clive, and that Two-Gun could stay with him to guard and care for him.

"What are yuh plannin' to do, Blaze?" asked Clive.

"I want to scout around a little," Ormsby answered. "You remember, of course, the scrap at the Diamond L. On the theory that, if those valley ranchers had any papers about them at any time, Pence ought to have some on him after the fire. I plugged him on the chin. As he went down I got what I wanted, a package of letters and papers, all having to do with the Henley people, and relating to what has been going on in Cottonwood Valley."

"I recollect yuh gettin' 'em. Did yuh l'arn much from 'em?"

"I surely did, and when you are able to hit the trail again, I believe we shall be able to rid Miss Forest of her enemies at a single stroke."

"Tell me what yo're a-drivin' at," begged Clive, his eyes alight with interest.

"Not yet," Ormsby shook his head determinedly. "You would only lie here and worry and fume to be up and doing, and I can't allow that. I promised you that in two weeks from today you and Two-Gun may take the trail for home, provided you ride in easy stages and take at least a week or ten days for the trip. When you arrive I shall try to have things so arranged that you can take up the trail once more and wind this business up."

"I reckon the time's a-goin' to pass mighty slow until I get back to the Swingin' J," Clive said, resignedly. "Well, so be it; two weeks from today, yuh old horned toad, I'm a-startin'."

"Agreed," Ormsby nodded. "Two-Gun, you be sure that it is two weeks, and not two days."

"I'll 'tend to it, Blaze," Farrell promised.

Three hours later Ormsby rode out of Golfornia, heading northwest. More than a week later he emerged from a little canyon, down which ran a tributary to Cougar Creek, and out onto the broad reaches of the Box O. He dropped from his horse in front of the Swinging J bunkhouse a little before sunset.

Forest, who had seen him ride into the yard, was the first to reach his side. She had had no news except a diplomatically worded note from Blaze, brought by a messenger under strict orders to keep a closed mouth. Blaze, anticipating the eager questions that were on her lips, smiled his slow grin.

"Mr. Clive Morgan will be with you shortly, Miss Forest," he drawled. "He is recovering nicely. Two-Gun is with him, and you need have no worries for him now. I made certain he was well and regaining his strength rapidly before I left."

But Forest was not satisfied with this and bit by bit she drew from him the details of Clive's clash with Cougar, Three-Finger and Digger Wade. She cried softly when Blaze described how following hot on Clive's trail, he and Two-Gun had found him, sagged against a wall, gun in hand, unconscious, but still facing whoever might be enemies. Her heart gave a glad throb of anticipation when Ormsby promised that soon Clive would come riding into the ranch yard as fit as ever.

Then he left her, turning into the bunkhouse where the others, already aware of his arrival, greeted him boisterously. He repeated the story for their benefit, then got down to the business that was absorbing his mind.

"You fellows are going to take a ride with me in the morning," he said. "We are going over to that valley below the outlaws' nest at Brindletown."

"What's up, Blaze?" asked Bull Ellerby. "Yuh figgerin' on havin' me heave some more boulders down on them bozos?"

"I don't think there will be any stone-throwing, Bull. Though we may see some action. I believe we shall find some of Miss Forest's cattle over there and also that we may run into some of the choicest and hardest employees of the Henley Cattle & Sales Co."

"Say, yuh dang' old longhorn, what are yuh drivin' at?" querried Spud Garrett. "Yuh mean to say yuh got some real, honest-to-gosh information on that layout over there and this fixin' here in Cottonwood Valley?"

Ormsby nodded.

"I believe I have," he answered slowly. "At least, from the information I have gathered from those papers and letters I swiped from old Pence, that valley below Brindletown is a huge dumping ground for a bunch of cattle rustlers who have been operating all through this part of the state, and even across the line into New Mexico."

"Elucidate, Blaze," urged Shad Stevens. Ormsby dropped on a bunk and rolled a brown-paper cigarette.

"I learned that the Henley Cattle & Sales Co. is a stock concern," he went on. "That is, it was financed on other peoples' money through the sale of common and preferred stocks. In selling these securities the Henley promoters went on record with the state government and with the people who bought their stock to the effect that they owned every last foot of ground in this valley, save only the open range; furthermore, they gave a list of the ranches here that they were supposed to own, control or carry options on. Among these were listed the Swinging J, the Lazy X and the Circle C."

"Yuh shore sound interestin'," said Piute Allen.

"Now, by making those claims the Henley people used fraudulent means to dispose of their stock and laid themselves open to prison terms. Realizing this, and desiring to make good on their pre- stock campaign claims, they decided to acquire the ranches they did not already control, and they have been using every means in their power to do so. Miss Forest was hardest hit, because she was a woman, and I believe they would have succeeded in chasing her out of here if Clive had not been bitten by the wanderlust bug and drifted over this way. There is more to it than that.

"The Henley crowd only just recently announced that they had disposed of the Lazy X, Swinging J and Circle C ranches for cash considerations, giving as the reason for the sales that none of the three was needed or was a dividend-payer. Of course, it is now put up to these crooked manipulators to show an accounting of the money received from these supposed sales, and that means the cash must actually be in the treasury when the auditors look things over. Now, how have they gone about getting this money?

"Here's how: For the last two years, or ever since they found they could not buy the ranches of Hart, Simmons and Miss Forest, they have had a band of rustlers working far and near around Brindletown. The cattle this gang has stolen have been fattened in the valley over there and, in due time, shipped to the Henley people by several routes. The sales, on paper, were made to a J. V. Sellers and the cattle were shipped to him, of course. But the letters show that Sellers was none

other than Robert Frobisher Henley, president, treasurer and general manager of the Henley Cattle & Sales Co. Of course, the money received from the sale in the Chicago market of these stolen steers has been, and will continue to be used to make up the deficit Henley has succeeded in creating in the company's cash account.

"It is a simple scheme, isn't it? But it is the simple things that fool the suckers and defraud the public. No one, of course, ever thought to come out here and investigate before buying the stock. The Henley crowd had a rattling good agent on this end to handle their dirty affairs, too. I believe you have all seen him here."

"Who is the skunk?" asked Pink Sellers.

"The fellow they call Streak," Blaze answered. "You remember he came in with Cougar, Coldwater and the sheep through Saddleback Pass?"

"Well, humped-back horned toads, what are we a-goin' to do about it?" Piute Allen demanded.

Blaze looked at him thoughtfully and, after a puff or two at his cigarette flipped it through the open window.

"Plenty, if we desire," he answered. "One of the letters was to the effect that a thousand steers in the valley below Brindeltown were ready for shipment and that they were to be taken out the northern pass, into New Mexico, and driven up toward the Santa Fe Railroad. There were special instructions that all Swinging J stock on hand were to be the first ones sent out. I don't believe Pence had time to see Streak, so those steers probably are in the valley this very minute."

"Then, we want to get busy and hustle 'em out of there," said Pink. "But we got to remember that damn nest on the mounting, where all them roosters is hangin' out. I reckon they'll start things a-humpin' when they see us percolate over that-a-way for them cows."

"I'm not so sure of trouble over there," said Blaze. "Those fellows probably will not be expecting us; likely they are busy repairing their roost, or building another in a spot not so susceptible to boulders from above. We must go easy, of course, cut out what Swinging J steers we may find and bring them through in as many drives as may be necessary."

"I reckon us Lazy X fellers will ride with yuh, Ormsby," said Monte McCourt. "I wouldn't be su'prised if they's a lot of our cows over that-a-way. Yuh know we lost a lot of 'em in the last one-two years."

"You fellows will ride with us, sure, Monte," Blaze answered. "Now, everybody get ready to start first thing in the morning. Six of us will remain here with Miss Forest; so that's settled."

THEY left in the cool of the early dawn. To the surprise of those who had been over the trail with Ormsby on the night they had fought it out with the rustlers at Brindletown, he turned off across the Box O ranch shortly after fording Cougar Creek and turned up the little canyon with the stream and the rank growth of grass and scrub willow.

"This ain't the way, Blaze," said Spud.

"This is the real way, Spud. This is the way they have been driving the cattle. I discovered it from the letters I took from Pence, and when I rode back from Golfornia I cut into the valley under Brindletown and came back into the Cottonwood this way. It is easy going all the way."

The sun had barely touched the western rim of the mountains when they rode into the southern end of the beautiful, fertile valley that stretched five miles wide and twenty miles long between the peaks that formed the Brindle Canyon country.

They camped out under the stars, careful that their fire was shielded from Brindletown when they cooked their evening meal, and with the first hint of dawn they were in their saddles and out in the valley, moving in scattered formation.

The first cattle they rode among bore brands that were strange to most of them, but one or two looked familiar. Spud Garrett swore that he recognized at least one mark as belonging to a huge ranch that sprawled just north of Benson, while another brand, according to Monte McCourt, belonged to another great ranch that was immediately west of Benson.

At noon, in the upper reaches of the valley, they rode among a herd of fat, sleek steers, all of which bore either a Swinging J or a Lazy X brand.

"I reckon that settles things, Blaze," said Shad Stevens, looking across the tossing horns and waving tails. "We got enough evidence here to string up every geezer in Brindletown. Looks like old Simmons'll save a lot of his stock, too. What'll we do now? Drive 'em home?"

The sharp *ping-g-g* of a bullet answered him. Like one man the combined outfits left their saddles and sprawled in the

high grass, where they raised on their hands and looked off across the valley. A score of riders came plunging toward them, armed heavily.

"Looks like we're in for a fight, boys," said Ormsby. "We are as many as they, so lie low and wait until they get close, then cut loose and make every shot tell."

But Blaze was wrong. The riders suddenly veered off to the right and stormed away up the valley, heading toward the northern pass, five miles ahead. Blaze watched them tearing along, then rose and ran toward his horse.

"Come on, fellows," he cried. "I guess this is the end of those birds. They are pulling their freight. Maybe we can speed their going if we hustle."

He led the way and his comrades thundered after him, but their best efforts only brought them in sight of the outlaws when the latter entered the northern pass. One man, a tall, thin rider on a roan mare, paused long enough to wave a derisive hand; then he, too, disappeared.

"They seen us all right," growled Spud, "and they either smelled a rat or they got plumb skeered. Hell of a note to do us out of a leetle shindig."

"I'm satisfied as it is," said Ormsby. "We've had enough trouble. I imagine those fellows will scoot through New Mexico, head south and eventually wind up below the Rio Grande. Well, that's over, so let's get our steers started back toward the ranch."

ONE week later they drove four hundred Swinging J and nearly three hundred Lazy X steers out of the little canyon and across the Box O, heading them toward Forest's ranch. As they passed within easy sight of the Box O ranch-house, Ormsby, Spud and Shad, struck by the changed appearance of the place, rode up to the structure and looked it over.

The Box O ranch-house was deserted.

"Looks like old Horner took a hint from somewhere and skedaddled," opined Shad. "Well, good riddance, says I."

"We'll shore have a hatful of news to spiel to Tex when he shows up," grinned Spud. "Boy, the old ball cert'inly has be'n a-rollin' since he give 'er that first heave, I'd tell a man."

By nightfall they had what was left of Forest's steers, together with the Lazy X stock, back on the Swinging J acres, and, this accomplished, rode into the ranchyard, dropping wearily from their ponies.

There, ten days later, came Clive, a little pale from his long confinement but apparently as fit as ever.

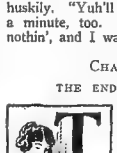
Forest had been expecting him for days and now, as Two-Gun and the former Ranger dropped from their mounts, she ran toward Clive unashamed, arms outstretched, and was clasped in his embrace. When their lips parted she drew back a little and held his face between her hands. There were tears in her eyes.

"Boy, boy," she whispered brokenly, "never endanger your life that way again. I can't stand it. Oh, your poor neck; that scar will always be there, won't it? But I'll love you all the more for it, and I shall never, never, so long as I live, forget how you came to get it."

"Don't talk that-a-way, girlie," he said huskily. "Yuh'll have me a-blubberin' in a minute, too. Shucks, that scar ain't nothin', and I wasn't hurt bad."

CHAPTER XIX

THE END OF THE TRAIL



THE girl in the outside office of the Henley Cattle & Sales Co. looked up with interest at the tall, tanned figure who entered, followed immediately by a slender young woman, hardly more than a girl.

"Did you wish to see someone?" she asked.

"I reckon I'm a-lookin' for Mr. Robert Frobisher Henley."

"Your name, please?" The girl was writing on a card.

"Name of Morgan, ma'am; Clive Morgan."

"What is the nature of the business you wish to see him about, Mr. Morgan?"

"I'll tell that to Mr. Henley, ma'am," he answered.

"Mr. Henley sees no one until he knows whether it is going to be worth his time, sir."

"Say, ma'am, you just sashay in to that boss of yore'n and tell him there's a man name of Morgan and a gal here to see him on something that happens to be dang' important to him and his'n, and let me know what he says. What say?" Clive's eyes were steady and his voice was level,

but Forest holding his arm lightly, felt his muscles tense.

"Very well."

The girl rose and walked toward a door at the rear of the room.

"I can tell you now what his answer will be, but shall do as you request," she paused long enough to say over her shoulder.

In two minutes she returned.

"Mr. Henley is too busy to see you, Mr. Morgan. He said that if you would drop in this afternoon, about four o'clock, he would see you then."

Clive looked at her silently, his lips compressing in a straight line. Then he tossed his hat onto a nearby chair and took a step toward the door through which the girl had carried his message.

"I reckon I better tell him muhse'f that I'm here to see him, that muh name is Morgan and that I got business with him," he said. The girl looked at him with alarm in her eyes.

"Don't force your way in there, sir. Please don't. He is angry just now and there is a man in there with him that I suspect of being a gumman."

Clive's lips loosened a little and the shadow of a smiled played across them. With a swift gesture he unbuttoned his coat and shifted a swelling bulge that showed beneath his left arm.

"I ain't afraid, none whatever," he said grimly, and took another step toward the door.

"Perhaps the young lady is right, Clive," Forest said anxiously. "Can't we wait?"

"Now, look-a here, Forest," Clive turned to her. "I come all the way from Arizony to see Robert Frobisher Henley, and I reckon he's not such a dang' big toad in this here Chicawgo puddle that he can't spare me the time I need. You wait here till I call yuh, which I hope will be right soon." He patted her hand tenderly.

Forest dropped on a plush-covered chair and Clive put a firm hand on the door that barred his way. He turned the knob and swung it open with a single motion, stepping calmly inside.

"What do you mean by coming in here, sir?"

The angry query came from a short, red-faced fat man who sat before a highly polished mahogany desk, talking with another. Clive closed the door and looked them over, concealing his surprise. The fat man was talking to Streak, the gunman who had accompanied Cougar and Coldwater into Cottonwood Valley with the sheep. Streak recognized Clive at the same instant and rose to his feet with a startled oath.

"I had to come onless I was willin' to pass up seein' yuh," Clive answered the fat man's question, ignoring Streak. "Are yuh Robert Frobisher Henley?"

"Get out of here!" cried the other. "If you don't leave instantly I shall call the police."

Clive looked at him coldly.

"Call in all the dang' police yuh want to, Mr. Henley, but afore they can get here I reckon yo're a-goin' to have a leetle chin-chin with me," he answered, his voice hard.

The fat man saw determination and menace in Clive's eyes.

"Well, spiel your complaint; get it out of your system," he conceded, wilting.

"Answer my question, first," said the Swinging J foreman.

"What question?"

"Are you Robert Frobish——"

"Yes," cried the fat man. "What about it?"

A grim smile lighted Clive's face and in three strides he was beside Henley's desk. His left hand dipped in his inside coat pocket and drew forth a letter, which he laid before the other.

"Then, I reckon yo're the gent that wrote this here leetle billydoo," he said.

HENLEY glanced down at the paper, unfolded it and started to read, but before his eyes had scanned three lines he sprang to his feet, rage and alarm in his face.

"What's the meaning of this? What about this letter?" he shouted.

"Did you write it?" Clive persisted.

Henley sensed that Clive was feeling his way, wanting to be on sure ground at each step, before he made any assertions. He decided on evasion.

"Maybe yes, maybe no," he answered. "But what if I did?"

"Yuh wrote that letter, all right, Mr. Henley," Clive drawled. "If I sign a legal agreement freein' yuh from all damage of the past, liability to future arrest, et cetery and so forth, at my hands or at the hands of the Swingin' J ranch, will yuh give me a certyfied check for one hundr'd thousand dollars? And then will yuh kick out the buzzards yuh've got runnin' yore ranches

in Cottonwood Valley, put white men on 'em and run yore business there accordin' to Hoyle, so help yuh Je-hosy-fat?"

With an oath Henley seized the letter, ripping it to shreds and scattering the particles about the room.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he growled. "I believe you mentioned a letter. Where, pray, is the letter?"

To his surprise Clive burst into hearty laughter and hit his thigh a heavy thwack with his palm.

"Yo're good," he chuckled. "But since yuh mention letters I reckon I got six that was taken from old Cief Pence, and all of 'em is real, honest to gosh humdingers, too. Come to think of it, there was a order in that mess, signed by yoreself, to the effect that certain Swingin' J cows was to be taken out of the Brindle Canyon country and shipped to J. V. Sellers, here in Chicawgo. Yuh ever remember writin' any such dang' fool stuff as that?"

Henley's face suddenly went gray. He bent across the mahogany surface of his desk and whispered rapidly to Streak. The latter, who had resumed his seat stood and clapped his hat on his head.

"Sure, Mr. Henley; I'll be leavin' and show up tomorra about that business." Streak said carelessly, as though he had been requested to depart. "Well, s'long."

He turned and strode toward the door. His hand touched the knob, but never turned it.

With the snake-quick movement that had given him his nickname, Streak turned and threw up his right hand, a gun clutched in his fingers. A crashing roar filled the room.

But it was Clive's own .45 that had spoken. Out of the tail of his eye he had watched Streak, anticipating something like this. Now, as coolly as though he were shooting the head from a rattlesnake, he struck the gun from Streak's hand by sending a bullet into the gunman's arm.

Dropping his gun back into its holster under his arm, Clive walked over, picked up Streak's fallen six-shooter and tossed it into a waste basket. The door flew open and two white-faced girls rushed in.

"Sho, now, Forest," Clive drawled softly, "don't yuh be skeered now. A toad just tried to potshot me from behind and I plugged him in the arm. He ain't hurt bad, but he shore ain't a-goin' to do no more shootin' until he gets patched up considerable.

"I know yuh, Streak," he said, turning to the man on the floor, "and I know all about yore part in this game. I got too much on you and Henley to worry about either of yuh talkin' to the police or anybody, so yuh better stay out of this here argyment from now on. *Sabe?*"

"You young ladies please to return outside and wait a leetle while," Clive turned back to the girls. Then directly to Henley's secretary, "I'll give yuh a leetle tip; if yuh don't want to put yore boss in jail yuh won't call no police in on this. Am I right Henley?"

"Do not call the police, Miss Brice," the fat man hastily corroborated. "It is all right, and you may leave us."

With the door closed again and Henley seated at his desk, Clive walked over to the chair Streak had occupied and dropped into it. Streak was sitting on the floor, nursing his maimed arm, which he had managed to bandage with his bandanna.

"Now, Mr. Henley, you and me is a-goin' to talk business a-plenty," he said.

A little color came back into Henley's face and he breathed easier.

"Just exactly what do you want?" he asked finally.

Clive kept his steady gaze on the other's shifting eyes.

"I want one hundr'd thousand dollars, Henley, and I won't take a cent less for layin' off yore hide, either."

"You are either crazy by nature or a plain damn fool," snapped Henley, getting back a little courage and deciding on bluster.

"Yuh'll either give me a hundr'd thousand dollars or yuh'll go to jail, and that ain't no plain damn' foolishness," he said coolly.

"Just how do you expect to collect one hundred thousand dollars from me?" Henley was more at ease now and, reaching into a drawer of the desk, he drew forth a cigar and lighted it calmly.

"I reckon I'll have to convince yuh further," said Clive. "Listen, Henley; I know that yuh sold a lot of stock in this here company of yore'n and that yuh didn't have no titles to a lot of ground yuh claimed. That made yuh liable for fraud. I could've got yuh there, mebbe, but yuh covered yore tracks by sayin' yuh'd sold them ranches yuh never owned. That left yuh open where I did get yuh, for yuh was stealin' cows and sellin' 'em, and usin' the money yuh got that-a-way to make up that short-count in yore treasury."

"Interesting, if true," agreed Henley. "I wonder how you expect to prove all this?"

"I hunted up old Cief Pence, skeered hell out of him, and made him come to Chicawgo with me," said Clive patiently, yet with mounting anger. "I got him right here now, in a hotel, waitin', and he's ready to go before any court of justice and make a affydavit to what yuh told him verbally and by letter. What have yuh got to say to that?"

"I believe you and I had better talk this thing over," said Henley, his voice suddenly suave and persuasive. "There are no witnesses to our conversation save Streak, so I think we can be frank with each other. Now, to save further argument, I will admit I put over a fraudulent stock deal, and that I organized a band of rustlers to make good the money I looted from my company's treasury. But if we go into court over it I think I can beat you. It takes money to fight court cases and your proof would have to be overwhelming. Don't forget I would have a preponderance of witnesses, and they would be directly from the Cottonwood Valley, too."

"What are yuh drivin' at, now?" Clive demanded aware that Henley was taking a new tack.

"Just this: what would you say to you and I making a deal?"

Henley rose and came around to Clive, who rose to his feet also and stood warily on guard.

"Supposing that you give me those letters you claim to have and sign a little quit notice in this whole affair," the fat man went on. "Then supposing that I hand you, for your trouble, a personal check for twenty-five thousand dol——"

CLIVE'S fist landing squarely on Henley's mouth stopped the flow of words. Henley catapulted backward and brought up with a crash against his desk. He rose, holding his bruised mouth, his face an inferno of rage. With a curse he shook his fist at Clive.

"Damn you," he cried viciously, "I'll see you in hell now before I'll make any sort of a deal with you. Go to court; see if I care. I'll spend every cent I have fighting you, and I don't think you have enough money behind you to carry the case any farther than the local courts, either."

"You keep a civil tongue between your teeth after this, yuh dang' sheep-nose," cried Clive, "and I won't hit yuh no more. Now, as far as goin' to court is concerned, I reckon I will if I have to, but somehow it seems to me that I won't have to."

"Get out of here!" shouted Henley. "Get out at once!"

Clive eyed him coldly.

"I reckon I don't leave without my money or onless you leave at the same time in company with a policeman," he said. "I reckon yuh don't know that we raided Brindletown once and brought back four hundr'd head of Swingin' J cows and a lot of Lazy X stock from that valley, do yuh? and yuh prob'ly don't know that we took the whole outfits of the Swingin' J, the Lazy X and Circle C and rounded up that bunch of outlaws' yuh had in the Cottonwood Valley, either. We took Bender, Horner and all the rest of 'em, but we didn't get Horner until we located him hidin' out at Bender's. Now, you listen to me, Henley: every dang' one of them fellers, on a promise of freedom, has signed confessions and every one of them papers pins the whole she-bang on you direct."

Henley's face again blanched.

"Furthermore," Clive continued relentlessly, "we made it so hot for old Bender the day afore I left the valley that he kicked in with a sworn statement to the effect that yo're the whole works behind that Brindletown gang that skeedaddled for Mexico and that was robbin' ranches clean down around Benson. We also got the signed agreement atween him and you for him to run the ranch as though he owned it, file a deed to it and all, the while you hold the actual ownership in yore safe back here and use him as a buffer to ward off any danger of you bein' connected with his dirty work. How, are yuh goin' to be able to get around that?"

"Settle with him, Henley, or we'll al' land in jail," groaned Streak, who had listened to the proceedings with fear rising higher every minute. "I don't mind cashin' in if 'I got the range under my feet, but I'm damned if I'm a-goin' to prison, not if I have to hand Morgan evidence myself."

Henley drew a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his bleeding mouth. His bravado seemed falling from him.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Morgan," he said, and Clive saw fear and subterfuge mingled in his eyes; "I'll go into this thing this afternoon and tonight and see if I can scare up one hundred thousand dollars. You come back here at ten tomorrow

morning. If I have been able to raise the entire sum, I'll hand it to you then; otherwise, I'll have to negotiate a note with you."

Clive laughed harshily.

"Yuh think I'm a-goin' to walk out of here and give yuh the rest of the day and a whole night to make yore getaway in? Not much, Henley. You and me settles afore I leave this room, or the police'll come here and take Streak and you down where yuh can do yore explainin' to a court —and, among other charges I'll place ag'in yuh, will be about six different ones for murder."

Henley saw that he was cornered. Streak began reviling him and urging that he meet Clive's demands. Under the strain Henley reached for a button on his desk. Clive stopped him.

"What are yuh a-goin' to do?" he demanded.

"Call my secretary and have her type off the agreement for you to sign, after which she will draw you the check for one hundred thousand dollars," Henley answered, his voice weak.

"Where are yuh aimin' to get that money? Yuh figgerin' on givin' me a Henley Cattle & Sales Co. check?"

Henley raised his eyebrows and gave his lips a soft pat with his handkerchief.

"Certainly," he answered, then, with some asperity. "What other check do you think I would give you?"

"Well, I ain't takin' no Henley Cattle & Sales Co. check, and yuh can buck the old bank on that. That money don't belong to you but to yore stockholders, and they ain't to blame for yore dirty work. No, sir-ee; yo're a-goin' to give me yore own personal check and it's a-goin' to be certyfied."

"And I will get from you in return?"

"From me yuh get a agreement that I, personal like, and the Swingin' J, won't never do nothin' ag'in yuh, legal or otherwise; I'll sign a receipt sayin' we're paid up in full for all damage, et cetery and so forth at yore hands. I reckon that oughta be sufficient."

"Quit quibblin' and get down to business, Henley," growled Streak.

"I guess that will be sufficient," agreed Henley. "I'll have my secretary draw up the paper at once."

He pressed the button.

MISS BRICE appeared, her face pale. Henley indicated a chair and she dropped into it, pencil and notebook in hand. He began dictating while Clive smoked and listened to the fat man's smooth, rolling voice. A few minutes later the secretary laid the typed agreement and Clive, reading it, placed the carbon copy in his pocket.

"We're all set now," he remarked, "soon as yuh fix up that check. Of course, yuh onderstand that when I sign this it don't pr'tect yuh from old Simmons of the Lazy X or Bud Hart of the Circle C and I reckon they shore are a-rearin' to get at yuh with violent hands. Howsumever, Simmons is to get thirty thousand of this money and Hart's to get fifteen thousand, so the chances are they'll let the thing die —onless yuh start yore crookedness ag'in, in which case, Lord help yuh!"

He paused as Henley drew a checkbook from his pocket.

"Yuh onderstan, also, that I'll sign this paper on the agreement that yuh put new men on them ranches of yores, that yuh take 'em over in yore own name, all legal and clear, and that yuh quit yore crooked work in Cottonwood Valley?" he added.

Henley nodded, his pen moving swiftly across the check. He blotted it and called to his secretary.

"Just let me see that check afore yore secrytary gets it certyfied," Clive suggested. Henley threw the check down viciously. Clive picked it up, glanced at it hurriedly, then tossed it back.

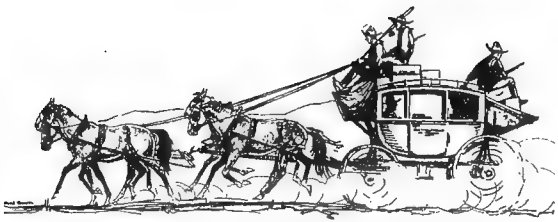
"I reckon yuh'll have to make it out all over ag'in, Henley. Sorry to keep yuh waitin' this way, of course, but we got to have everything right and legal, ain't we?"

Puzzled and a little startled, Henley picked up the check. His eyes told him it was made out properly.

"What the hell are you driving at now?" he snaped. "You've beaten me, and here's the check for the sum you demand; likewise, my secretary is waiting here to have it certified."

Clive chuckled again, his eyes suddenly turning sunny.

"Don't get impatient, now, Henley. Yuh got that paper made out to Miss Forest Glade, which ain't ezackly correct. Just write it all over ag'in, and this time make it payable to Mrs. Clive Morgan."



THE ROMANCE OF TRANS PORTATION

By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

ANYONE who delves into the study of the development of the West cannot but be intrigued by the almost irresistible lure to be found in the study of the subject from the angle of transportation. Civilization always has spread along the waterways at first, like a timid child, learning to walk, clinging to a chair. By following the waterways food and water were assured, and there always was a well-marked and a comparatively easy way to get back to the starting point.

To the mighty Missouri, stretching its twenty-six hundred miles sinuously between the Mississippi and the mountains, we naturally turn to find the first sorties from the settlements. Timid attempts were gloriously crowned by Lewis and Clark, with government backing; and the Missouri led them to the base of the mountains, where horses were substituted for boats. A few years later the river was abandoned earlier by Hunt and McClellan, who forsook it not far south of the present southern boundary of North Dakota, and struck boldly, on horse back, westward for the Pacific. Not so many years later Ashley left it still farther down and followed the Platte from near Council Bluffs.

Gradually the routes became concentrated and travel flowed along well-defined trails; but it remained for wheeled vehicles to mark a sharp change in epochs. The first wheels to cross the prairies were on a small cannon taken by one of the Ashley expeditions to the vicinity of Salt Lake, but these wheels and those of the following carts of later trading expeditions belonged to the first epoch, the period when the West yielded up its treasures and received nothing in return. And it was fitting that the wheeled vehicles which increased the exploitation should swiftly cause its death.

Where wheels have gone, wheels may go; and the feasibility of wagon traffic across the Divide, coupled to alluring reports about Oregon and California, worked yeastily in the souls of that restless population which ever had its eyes turned westward. Wagons could go as far as Ft. Hall, and no farther; therefore they went there, were left there, and the owners finished the trip astride. Then it became known that wagons could go all the way, and the migration began in earnest. California called, and greater numbers of wagons rolled down the valley of the Humbolt, over the passes of the Sierras, and showed the way to others.

So far as mail facilities were concerned, Salt Lake City was between the devil and the deep sea. California mails could go by boat, but Salt Lake City's could not. Half-hearted attempts were made to carry the mails overland from both directions, but the service was not satisfactory. Then came Buchanan's farcical Mormon War, with government troops in the mountains, far from a base of supplies and far from orders. The need for the carrying of mail and supplies was pressing, and was well met. Great wagon trains set out over the prairie roads in endless procession, the

wagons built especially for the business and having a capacity of from 5,000 to 7,000 pounds. California had found gold, before this, and a few years later the Pike's Peak excitement swept the country. Now the wagon trains crawling across the plains found other routes. The North Platte and the Sweetwater, the South Platte and the Lodgepole, South Pass and Bridger's Pass, the Humbolt and the Snake were wreathed with dust; ranches for trading, and for the feeding of this traffic sprang up at strategic points along the way; settlers pushed from the mainline roads and began the era of giving something to the West instead of taking it away.

Denver had been born, and in the mountains and valleys roundabout was a growing population to be fed and clothed, clamoring for news, tools, and for steam boilers! The wagon trains grew into an almost unbroken string, the dust of one seen by the next, which showed its dust to a train behind. The journey to Denver, to Salt Lake, to California was trebly hazardous and wearing and slow to those who attempted it even with skilled guides and good outfits. Why not establish a passenger traffic which would be swift, direct, and comparatively easy and safe? It was done. Great coaches met the need, with skilled drivers and fast horses; with relay stations and eating stations. Distances telescoped, time shrunk. Denver was reached in six days; Salt Lake, in ten; Placerville, California, in seventeen; and on one occasion, the stage proprietor being in a hurry, the entire distance from Placerville to Atchison, nineteen hundred miles, was covered in twelve days.

Seventeen days to California was all right for passengers, but there was great hunger for fresher news and faster mails. The Civil War was darkening the horizon, and California felt too far from Washington. Senator Gwinn felt too far from his constituents, and got the ear of a Mr. Russell, whose imagination was as boundless as his courage. Oh, what a glorious age, and what magnificent gamblers lived in it! As the stage coach was faster than the freight wagon, so was the pony faster than the coach. No sooner said than done. New stations were built along the stage line, the shortest practical line was determined upon, and soon the light mail pouches were bouncing on the saddles of speeding ponies. California in seventeen days? That was now a joke. The beardless riders raced eastward and westward and made it in ten. Nineteen hundred miles in ten days, with a chip on the shoulder over every mile of it.

Horseflesh could do no better, but was an empire to be dependant on horse flesh? The nation answered NO. Gamble again, and gamble swiftly. Turn the iron thunderbolt loose along the rails, turn the lightning loose along the wires. Mile by mile the rails were laid, and league by league the wires were stretched; and Placerville was no longer seventeen days from the Missouri, for that distance was now covered in a quarter of the time. From New York the regular schedule was only seven days. And as for news? Hah! Ten days had become less than a tenth of a second.

The whole of the miracle has not yet been told. Consider that only forty-three years had passed between the rolling of Ashley's cannon wheels to the joining of the rails at Promontory Point; consider that less than sixty years separated the journey of Lewis and Clark through an unknown and perilous wilderness, to the flashing of the first telegram from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In half a century a vast and forbidding wilderness had been turned into an inland empire, and by the youngest first-class nation on the earth.

The price of this great achievement was courage, pain, privation, and death; the obligation rests squarely on us, every single individual of us, to see that the price was not paid in vain.

MIN AND THE KIDS

By ALBERT WILLIAM STONE

The law of the range is inexorable, as many a rustler has learned when the knowledge no longer could aid him. Still the dry-dust farmer took a chance —and the stern frontier code was invoked once more

I

HIGH summer in the Scattered Buttes country. Golden haze everywhere. Grass, bravely green when the yellow snow waters of spring were rushing through the arroyos, now shrunken into dust laden bunches of camouflaged nutriment. Silvery gray sagebrush dancing in the heat. Red buttes upending endlessly against the pale blue horizon. Violet shadows creeping between the foothills to the west, where the snow on the mountain peaks catches the last of the day's sun and reflects its rays rosily. Colors of the panorama turning to amber, rose, dull gray.

All the beauty was lost upon the man who stood at the edge of Little Spring Mesa, however. His name was Henry Stetson, and he was one of those misplaced components in the scheme of things known as a "dry duster." His dull eyes were staring at the superb scene, with no more comprehension of it than the unwashed windows of his crazy shack, fifty yards behind him. There was no glass in the windows; the clattering of dishes, evidently in the process of after-supper cleansing, emanated from the shack.

A boy, apparently about ten years old, shuffled through the white dust to where the man was standing. The lad's hair was an untidy yellow shock, sadly in need of the barber's shears. Numerous freckles adorned his tanned face. His shirt was tattered, his overalls patched and soiled, his eyes bright blue interrogation points.

"Ma says you gotta go to Sagebrush an' git some flour," he informed his father.

The latter did not answer immediately. His gaze at the instant was focused upon a knot of grazing cattle, close to the foot of the mesa. Others were in close proximity; still others, thousands of them, thickly dotted the land. The plains, knolls and mesas were patched with them. Against the sides of the distant foothills they formed dull red blotches of color.

"Ma says——"

The boy sprang back alertly at the man's sudden anger. He came to rest ten feet away, swallowing nervously.

"Anyhow, I'm hungry!" he persisted.

"Hungry!" snarled Henry Stetson. "I reckon you ain't the only one, then. Like as not Pete's hungry, too. An' Joe an' Minnie too. Maybe your ma's hungry. My stummick ain't exactly achin' with the grub that's in it."

He glared at the lad a moment, then shuffled through the dust toward the shack. In the doorway he paused, peering within. The interior of the cheerless little lean-to, designated the kitchen for want of a better name, was still light enough to make the light of lamp or candle unnecessary.

A discouraged looking woman stood at the wooden table on the opposite side of the room, washing dishes. Her hair hung in untidy strands across her flushed face. It was dry as the dust that surrounded the shack on all sides.

"What's this about flour?"

The woman paused, surveying her husband with lack-luster eyes.

"We're about out," she informed him. "Got enough for pancakes in the morning. That's all."

Her voice was toneless, drab. Henry Stetson shuffled into the room.

"Spears told me, last time I was down, he couldn't give us no more credit."

His wife laughed out with mirth. Then she resumed her labor at the dishpan. A tow-headed boy appeared in the entrance to the middle room. Another one peered over his shoulder. A baby, scantily clad and dirty, played listlessly on the plank floor. At the laugh something in the man cracked.

"Git out of here—all you kids!" he commanded.

They scuttled out of sight like rabbits frightened by the bark of a dog. The woman lifted a cracked plate from the pan and deposited it on the table.

"Ain't no call to holler at 'em like that," she observed. "'Tain't their fault they're hungry."

"It ain't mine, neither, if that's what you're hintin' at," he retorted. "Couldn't no man work harder than what I've worked, this summer. I ain't to blame if it never rains in this God-forsaken country. All I wish is——"

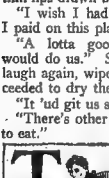
"Go on—wish!" she prompted him, her thin lips drawn back from her teeth.

"I wish I had the two hundred dollars I paid on this place."

"A lotta good two hundred dollars would do us." She laughed her mirthless laugh again, wiped her thin arms and proceeded to dry the pile of dishes.

"It 'ud git us somethin' to eat, anyhow."

"There's other ways o' gettin' somethin' to eat."



THIS time it was the man who gave the dry laugh. Apparently it was the expression of cynicism mutually agreed upon. He cast his battered hat to the floor and slumped into one of the two shaky wooden chairs. He stared downward at the baby.

"I ain't no cussed thief—yet," he muttered defensively.

"No, nor much of anything else," the woman retorted. "There's worse things than stealin', sometimes. One of them times is when your children is starvin', Henry Stetson. The Lord ain't gonna hold it ag'in a body to steal when his children's gotta have grub."

He wriggled uncomfortably on his chair.

"There's that there construction outfit." His voice did not carry conviction as to his sincerity. "Maybe they'd give me a job."

"You'd last about ten minutes at that kind o' work, an' well you know it," the woman exclaimed. "You're a sight more pindlin' than what you was when we come here. What's the use o' talkin' foolishness?"

"Well, what in time *kin* I do?" Stetson pulled nervously at his ragged mustache. His work-hardened fingers trembled. "No credit at the store. No way o' gittin' any. No——"

"An' enough grub in the house to last 'til tomorrow night, if we're careful not to eat it up before then," she interrupted. Her tone was relentless. "Kids all hungry. Pretty soon they'll be starvin'. An' school comin' on pretty soon, too. How are they goin' to school without decent clo'es? Pete ain't got anything but them overalls that I've mended an' patched 'til there ain't nothin' left to patch. Billy ain't got no underclo'es. Joe——"

"For Pete's sake, shut up!" The badgered man fairly yelled it at her. For answer she slammed a dish to the table with such force that it was shattered to fragments.

"Shut up!" she mimicked. "Oh, yes; I'll shut up, I will. An' then we'll just all sit aroun' and starve to death. Maybe that's what you're wantin', anyhow. A man that'll let his wife an' kids go hungry before he'll grab a chance like you've got!"

She paused. The frightened whispers of the children in the other room were sibilant in the darkening kitchen. The dry farmer gazed appealing at his wife.

"Now you listen here, Min. Don't go talkin' like that. Maybe I ain't been much of a provider since we come out here, but I've always been straight, Min. You know that. What's got into you, anyhow? You didn't never talk such stuff in the old days——"

"I never had to see my kids go hungry for grub in the old days," she interrupted

harshly. "Any woman on earth'll steal —kill, if she has to—'fore she'll stand for hungry young 'uns. Why, they're just babies——"

Her hard voice broke. With an oath the man sprang to his feet and strode to the door.

"I might git a job on McMeel's ranch," he suggested from the doorway.

"More foolishness," the woman charged. "McMeel is dead ag'in dry-dusters; you know that mighty well. Likely he'd take a shot at you if you set foot on his ranch. So would any of his cowpunchers. Anyhow— ain't they done us enough dirt already? Have they gotta bust down our fences a few more times 'fore you'll know what they think of us? Haven't their steers tromped down our garden 'til there ain't a single livin' thing left in it? Haven't they?"

At her angry recital of their wrongs the man's hunted eyes flamed for an instant. The eternal war between nesters and cattlemen was too involved for his comprehension. He knew that, for some inexplicable reason, he had been cruelly and senselessly harassed by the riders of the neighboring McMeel ranch almost from the first day of his appearance on the little mesa dry farm.

His wife's heavy brogans clumped heavily as she crossed the floor to his side. With trembling finger she pointed through the doorway.

There's twenty thousand cattle out there," she said. "We've got a rifle. Back home you used to be a butcher by trade. That railroad construction outfit will buy all the fresh beef they kin git; the *Sagebrush Courier* says so. An' not a cattleman in Scattered Buttes will sell 'em a pound, just because they're ag'in havin' another railroad built through this country."

"I've heard all that before," he said sullenly. "What d'ye expect me to do?"

"You know as well as I do, Henry Stetson!" she exclaimed. "Don't ask me what to do! I've told you what I think, often enough."

Her thin lips compressed into a straight line, she clumped wearily back to the wash pan. Her husband continued to stare through the doorway. A wide-hatted outrider crossed his line of vision, disappearing in the slowly thickening gloom, a trail of cigarette smoke over his shoulder. The dark objects that were cattle parted sluggishly before the rider's horse. The homesteader's eyes grew hard.

"He's got enough to eat," he muttered aloud.

"What's that?" The woman paused with dish-cloth suspended. Her husband picked up his hat and crammed it on his head.

"Nothin'. I was just wonderin' how many shells we got fer the rifle. I'll have to clean it——"

"You won't have to clean anything," she retorted quickly. "It's all cleaned an' ready. You'll find a box o' shells on the dresser in the other room."

II

WADE DOUGLAS, stalwart young engineer in charge of construction activities for the new spur of the Western Continental and Tidewater Railroad, sat in his tent house at the end of steel and frowned over the yellow paper in his hand. The sole illumination of the tent's interior was from a candle, stuck in a bottle at his elbow.

"It's a confounded shame," Douglas exploded, tossing the telegram to the table. "Here we've got three hundred men working on this job, with instructions to finish the line to Four Mile Creek before winter stops us. We're a hundred and twenty-two miles from the nearest food supply station. That bunch of chair-warmers back in Chicago make me tired!"

Jimmy Miller, his assistant, sat on an upended bolt keg and snorted in sympathy. The snort caused the candle to dance and sputter.

"What's the matter now?" he inquired.

"Grub." Douglas pointed to the telegram. "Read it."

Jimmy Miller perused the scrawled lines and nodded.

"Sounds like Mason, all right," he observed. "He never had to live on salt pork and beans, I guess."

Douglas swore roundly.

"I wish he had to handle these hunkies a few days," he exclaimed. "They're getting ugly, and I don't blame 'em. I can't seem to make that Chicago bunch of thickheads understand the situation. 'Rush work,' Mason says. Sure, I'll rush it. Fat chance!"

"Plenty of fresh beef all around us," the assistant remarked, after a pause. "Why not take a gun out and shoot a couple of steers? The cattlemen will never miss 'em."

"I'd like to," Douglas admitted, with a

sigh. "But of course it wouldn't do. The cattlemen hate us like poison, as it is. We can't afford to risk an open war; we'd use up too much precious time fighting. If this spur isn't finished to Four Miles Creek by the end of October, the contract will fail. Means a lot of forfeit money."

The flap of the tent was lifted suddenly, and a man stepped inside. He blinked in the candle light, a shock of black hair cascading from under his battered felt hat. Deep-set eyes glowed somberly above his gaunt, bearded cheeks.

"I'm lookin' for the boss," he announced in a husky voice.

"I'm the boss," Douglas replied shortly. He had been startled at the man's unceremonious entrance more than he would have cared to admit. "What's wanted? A job?"

"No, sir." The visitor glanced at Jimmy Miller. "I ain't exactly after no job. My business is sort o' private——"

"Spill it," the engineer suggested. "This is my assistant."

The man shuffled forward with a peculiar sidewise motion, turning first to assure himself that the tent flap had fallen in place behind him. As he came more fully into the circle of illumination the engineers could see that his mouth was trembling under his beard. The hand with which he steadied himself against the table was gaunt and work-hardened.

"I heard you want to buy some fresh beef," he said. "Seen it in the paper."

"That's right," Douglas nodded. "Are you a cattleman?"

The question was superfluous, a fact patent from the stranger's appearance. Nevertheless he nodded in return.

"In a sort of way, I reckon I am."

"The Cattleman's Association adopted a resolution, at their last meeting, pledging every member to refuse to sell this outfit any beef," Douglas went on, eyeing the man steadily. "Are you a member of the Association?"

"Well, no; not exactly."

"I see." The engineer leaned back.

The visitor cleared his throat.

"But I reckon I kin deliver you some beef, just the same," he ventured. "Only —you'd have to promise me not to—not to——"

"Not to tell on you?"

"I reckon that's it."

Douglas considered the man. He did not look like a cattleman. Neither, on the other hand, did he bear the earmarks of a rustler. The engineer made his decision quickly.

"I'll pay you twenty cents a pound for all the beef you can deliver to me, dressed," he announced. "I can't buy anything on the hoof, understand. There are no butchers connected with this outfit."

The man's somber eyes glowed.

"You got scales?"

"Yes."

"If I bring you a couple of hundred pounds, all dressed—how much'll that amount to?"

"Forty dollars."

"An' you'll pay cash?"

"Cash on the nail. Greenbacks. And I'll take two hundred pounds a day for an indefinite period, at the same terms," the engineer continued. "But I don't want any trouble over this, my friend. You understand?"

The stranger looked around furtively.

"There won't be no trouble," he promised eagerly. "I'll be here tomorrow night, about this time. An' I'll have the beef."

Suddenly he lifted the flap, peered without an instant, and was gone. Douglas drew a long breath and stared at his assistant.

"Maybe I'm taking a chance," he observed. "That chap acts peculiar, to say the least. But he looks honest. If he can materialize a thousand pounds or so of fresh beef for us in the next two or three weeks, our lives are saved—professionally, anyhow."

"He's no cattleman," Jimmy Miller opined positively.

"More likely a dry farmer, and half-starved at that," his chief remarked. "My dope is that he's going to sacrifice some of his own stock, probably as near starved as himself. His furtiveness is natural enough, when you stop to think what the cattlemen would do to him if they caught him selling beef to us."

"They'll string him higher than Haman if they ever catch him rustling," Jimmy Miller declared. "Cattlemen hate drydusters on general principles, anyhow."

Douglas was filling his pipe. He scratched a match across the surface of the table.

"I hope they don't catch him," he observed between the ensuing puffs. "The poor devil looks like he's up against it pretty hard. Judging from his appearance, he wouldn't be much worse off if they did catch him."

He leaned back contentedly. Footsteps approached outside, and the tent flap was

lifted again. An unshaven hulk of a youth entered.

"Just brought this from Morton," he announced, handing the engineer a yellow paper.

Douglas removed the pipe from his mouth and spat. He held the paper close to the sputtering candle. Then he swore, at the same time handing the missive to his assistant.

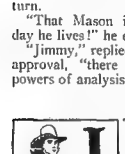
"What do you make of that?"

Jimmy Miller read it and swore in his turn.

"That Mason is getting crazier every day he lives!" he exclaimed. "Absolutely!"

"Jimmy," replied the engineer with open approval, "there are times when your powers of analysis are positively uncanny."

III



IT was Tough-Winter Evans who brought the news to the O Z ranch-house. It had been his turn to ride herd the day before. Tough-Winter's seamed countenance was flushed with excitement; his nose, it appeared, had been responsible for his discovery.

"I was ridin' past their cook tent when it hit me," he explained to the assembled cowmen, which assembly included the owner, William McMeel. "Fresh beef-steak fryin'; that's what it was. Couldn't 'a' missed it nohow. Shore did smell easy, as the feller says. I rides close up to the tent an' takes me a slant inside. Shore enough, there's big slabs o' beef sizzlin' on top o' the camp stove. Then I sees somethin' else."

"What was it?" This from McMeel.

"Quarter o' beef, hangin' on a peg," said Tough-Winter. "An' another one right beside it. Them dagoes looks like they're shore supplied with the real thing, an' plenty of it."

McMeel turned to Bowlegs Johnson, another outrider.

"Sort of tallies with what you saw," he remarked.

"Shore does," agreed Bowlegs.

"Bowlegs says he run across a fresh-skinned steer hide to-day," the boss explained to the others. "Had the O Z brand on it."

"Where'd yuh find it?" demanded Tough-Winter.

"Why, sort o' close to the Little Spring Mesa water-hole."

The men were called to supper a few minutes afterward. As they took their places around the big table McMeel scanned their faces shrewdly. The usual animated talk was absent; the silence, in fact, seemed pregnant with something sinister. Even the clatter of knives and forks against dishes was subdued. The men avoided their employer's eyes. McMeel pulled thoughtfully at the ends of his long mustache.

The cattleman belonged to the old school of Westerners, now almost extinct. In his youth he had participated in more than one "war" between range outfits. It was well known that he had played an important part in the three-years' struggle in Lincoln County, New Mexico, in the eighties. His bronzed face was deeply lined, his jaw of the fighting variety. His blue eyes could become hard as agates, and cold as ice, upon occasion. It had been many years since he had graduated from his fighting days; yet even now, occasionally, his gnarled hand might have been seen to stray to the place on his left hip where his forty-four had been worn in the old days.

Now as his gaze roamed over the faces of his young men, the blue of his eye was shot with something akin to apprehension. McMeel was not so young as he used to be, but he could read the signs.

"Listen to me, you young mavericks," he exploded suddenly, a potato-laden knife half-way to his mouth. "I won't have any body goin' off half-cocked around here. Understand?"

His men looked at him. Innocent surprise appeared on every face, but the old cattlemen was not deceived.

"You know doggoned well what I'm talkin' about," he continued, replacing the potato upon his plate and shaking a thick forefinger around the circle of faces. "You don't need to look at me with your mouths open, neither. This thing has got to be handled regular, accordin' to law. I'm boss around here, an' what I say goes. *Savvy?*"

Slim Mayfern, his handsome mouth open enough to reveal his white teeth; nodded.

"That's right," he confirmed.

Satan Carroll, whose coal-black eyes were glowing somberly, nodded. Bowlegs Johnson's solemn contenance was more solemn than ever. He was the first to resume his interrupted eating. Tough-Winter Evans, at the opposite end of the table, was the only one to grin. He did so broadly. McMeel brought his huge fist

down angrily, causing the dishes to jump.

"I mean what I say!" he shouted. "There's been enough cussedness goin' on in Scattered Buttes already. I hate a dry-duster as p'izen as anybody; but I won't have this outfit mixed up in any funny business."

Satan Carroll was champing his food with jaws as uncompromising as they were handsome. His black eyes were gleaming.

"What funny business?" he inquired smoothly. "What funny business was you referrin' to?"

"I'm referring to this steer-killin' business." McMeel felt a sense of futility. Hitting at his men in this way was like striking a partly deflated punching bag. He could get no reaction. "I just want to make it plain that this is a law-abiding country. The case will be handled according to law."

"To be shore it will," agreed Slim Mayfern, looking around the table for confirmation. "Ain't that right, boys?"

"That's right," they responded, nodding in a circle and looking decorously at their plates.

The cattleman gave up. The utter absence of argument over the issue meant defeat, and he knew it. The men finished their eating, departing without ostentation at the conclusion of the meal. Their quietness was uncanny. Tough-Winter Evans approached his employer, picking his teeth with a whittled-down match.

"Reckon I'll have to ask off tonight, Bill," he observed. "Gotta git me some snake fat to soften my saddle. The dogoned thing is gittin' too hard fer comfort."

McMeel fixed him with his eye.

"There's plenty of fat in the stables. Besides, I seen you softening yore saddle night before last. You stick right here on the ranch tonight. I want you to git an early start in the mornin'."

"All right, Bill. Jest as you say."

TOUGH-WINTER strolled with exaggerated nonchalance out of the door. The others were already gone. Ten minutes later the rancher heard the indignant snort of a horse and went outside to investigate. Darkness had fallen. He thought he heard the creak of a gate, to the left where the main road skirted the ranch. He hurried to the bunkhouse and found it empty. Several lighted lanterns hung on their pegs. Not a cowboy was to be found.

"I might have known it," McMeel muttered as he saddled his own swift horse. He had smelled the unmistakable odor of moonshine whisky in the bunkhouse. "All I hope is they don't git drunk too soon. That's all I hope."

He galloped through the gate, which had been left open, and down the road toward the county seat, Sagebrush. His bulky form clung to the saddle easily. Past numerous draws, scarcely visible in the darkness his mount dashed. He did not see the mounted forms grouped in one of them nor sense that firm fingers were gripping the sensitive nostrils of a dozen broncos. After the hoofbeats had died away Satan Carroll spoke.

"Goin' fer the sheriff." Satan's utterance was a trifle thick for reason that he was at the instant wiping his lips with the back of his hand. "Somebody better take this bottle before I git thirsty ag'in."

The bottle went the rounds, each man groping eagerly in the darkness for it. The horses, nostrils released, snorted in concert. The men filed out of the draw and foregathered in a group in the middle of the road. A sudden swish was followed by the sound of crashing glass against the side of a butte.

"Plumb empty," the thrower of the bottle explained. "Stand still, you ornery son-of-a-gun!"

"Plenty more where that come from," Carroll told him. He passed over a fresh bottle. "Drink hearty, gents. We'll need it."

As the fiery liquid sent its deadly fumes to their brains the speech of the men became more carelessly animated. Satan Carroll had appointed himself the ringleader.

"Old man's gone fer the sheriff," he repeated, guiding his bronco to a position a little in advance of the others. There was a sneer in his voice. His wide hat was silhouetted against the sky. "McMeel's gittin' soft in his old age. Wants to let the law handle a case o' rustlin'. It's a clear, open-an'-shut case, the way I look at it."

"That's right!" the men agreed in chorus, jerking at the bits, their horses dancing and plunging. The excitement of their riders was communicating itself to them.

"Country'll be better off without no cussed dry-dusters into it, anyhow," Satan went on. "They comes here an' helps theirself to a chunk o' range an' starts litterin' the country up with fences an' kids. What's more, they refuses to take the hints us

cowmen gives 'em. Then this one adds insult to injury by rustlin' an O Z steer an' sellin' the beef to the railroad. I asks you, gents, what has the law got to do with a personal matter like this? I asks you!"

"Nothin'!" his hearers roared, with a fine disregard for possible consequences.

"We'll run the coyote so far he can't smell his own tracks!" Slim Mayfern added.

Satan Carroll swung his forty-four to a more comfortable position against his hip and fondled the coiled rope at his side.

"Come on, then!" he shouted suddenly. "We're travelin'!"

The second bottle crashed against the butte as the cavalcade strung out in a gallop.

It was four miles to Little Spring Mesa. The vanguard of the riders reached it in twenty-five minutes. By this time the whisky had made of a lot of ordinarily peaceful cowpunchers a dangerous mob of irresponsibles.

They gathered at the foot of the mesa for a conference.

"We don't want his wife an' kids hollerin' an' cryin' around," Satan Carroll said. "So I'll jest ride ahead an' call him out, peaceable-like. When he comes out, you fellers grab him. Then we'll vamose, *pronto*."

One of the men spurred his horse to Satan's side. It was Scarface Merritt, oldest cow puncher in the Scattered Buttes country and youthful associate and crony of William McMeel's. Scarface carried his liquor like the veteran he was.

"Where yuh gonna take the skunk?" he demanded.

Satan considered.

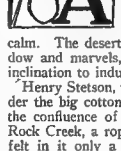
"Nearest cottonwood of any size is that big one where Rock Creek flows into the South Coulee," he said. "It's right close to the railroad camp."

His suggestion was met with a queer hush. At the outset, before the moonshine began to get in its work, nothing more serious than a bit of physical correction had been contemplated. But moonshine distilled in the recesses of the western Rockies contains no compromising elements. Satan Carroll was living up to his name. The liquor had made a devil of him, as it always did. Scarface Merritt whirled his bronco and faced the others.

"Satan's right, gents," he said quietly. "A dry-duster is bad enough. A rustler is wuss. We gotta handle this one right, an' throw the fear o' Gawd into the rest of 'em. I'm fer the cottonwood!"

He turned and began to negotiate the steep trail up the side of Little Spring Mesa. Satan Carroll followed suit. When the moon peeped over the eastern edge of the buttes, bathing the cattle on the hills in its radiance, the ancient law of the plains was beginning its noiseless, sinister grind.

IV



FTER a certain point strong human emotion expresses itself in helpless suspension of the faculties. The condemned murderer contemplates his certain fate with a strange calm. The deserted wife sits by the window and marvels, dully, that she has no inclination to indulge in dramatics.

Henry Stetson, the dry-duster, stood under the big cottonwood which grows near the confluence of the South Coulee with Rock Creek, a rope around his neck. He felt in it only a detached interest. His hands had not been tied; he reached up and eased the rope to a less annoying contact with the skin of his neck. It had not yet achieved that tautness which distinguishes the lariat from a hangman's noose. It was still merely a rope.

It was comparatively easy to discern the forms and identities of the men surrounding him in the bright moonlight. They were still mounted; the other end of the rope was securely attached to the saddle of Satan Carroll's bronco. The little animal was pawing the earth with impatience and a sharp hoof. Cigarette ends glowed, matches flared here and there, in nervous fingers. Moonshine whisky does not even compromise with caution.

"You're goin' on a long ride, old-timer," Satan addressed the doomed man. His tone was crisp. "An' you're goin' to start right soon. Anything you want to say before you go?"

Henry Stetson was standing wearily on one foot. He shifted to the other one.

"Not much, I guess," he said. His voice was husky, and he cleared his throat. "Ain't much use for me to say anythin', is they?"

"Not much," Satan agreed grimly. "You been clutterin' up the landscape around these parts too long as it is. We stood fer a lot from you, an' some others like you. But when you start shootin' our steers, you go too far. If you got anything to say, though, we'll let you say it—if you don't take too long."

Across the South Coulee the lights of the railroad construction camp gleamed. The men had not been quiet, and now squat forms began to pour out of the dingy tents and approach the sharp-cut banks of the arroyo. Every man in the cattle outfit had his hand on the butt of his gun, ready for instant, intimidating use. Satan Carroll had his gun half-way out.

"Talk fast," he commanded. "No use denyin' you shot the steer. We got the goods on you."

"I ain't denyin' it," Henry Stetson said wearily. "I killed the steer, all right. Killed it an' skinned it. An' then cut it up. I used to be a butcher, back in Indiany."

There was a stir in the circle that hemmed him in.

"I ain't denyin' it," the dry-duster repeated. "I done it because we was hungry —me an' the wife an' kids. The kids was awful hungry. Most drove Min crazy. Min used to be a mighty easy-goin' woman, back in Indiany. But when she seen the kids starvin', she sort o' went off her head. I guess I did, too. Feller kin stand a lot hisself, sometimes. But hungry kids—that's somethin' else."

He paused. This time Satan Carroll made no move to hurry him. Several of the glowing cigarette ends in the circle had grown dim and disappeared.

"I don't blame you boys none fer doin' —what you're doin'," the weary, husky voice went on. The group on the opposite bank, fifty yards away, was growing larger. "Maybe you've got a right. Stealin's stealin', no matter where you find it. But with the kids hungry, an' Min goin' off her head thataway, seemed like there wasn't nothin' else to do. So I killed the steer."

Satan Carroll eyed the group on the bank, his gun in his hand.

"You say you was a'butcher back where you come from?" he inquired casually.

"Butcher by trade," repeated Henry Stetson. "But got sick, back there. Had to sell out our home an' come West. Thought the air out here might make me well ag'in. Bought that there little dry ranch on the mesa. Took 'most all the money we had left; that's one reason we was all hungry. An' me not able to git a job nowhere, bein' sort o' pindlin' like I am. Looked like we was up ag'in it. So——"

The man shifted to the other foot.

"So I killed the steer," he wound up, inanely.

"An' then sold the beef to that railroad outfit over there," a cowboy remarked from the circle.

"I——"

Suddenly the form of a man, taller than the others, emerged from the group on the bank. He strode to its edge.

"What are you fellows doing over there?"

The voice was deep and rang with authority. As one man the circle of cowboys turned. Every hand was on a gun butt. Carroll's gun lifted threateningly, his hand on the hammer.

"We're holdin' a little moonlight party," he said. His voice was mild, his black eyes murderous in the half-light. "An' we ain't invitin' no company."

The tall man held up one hand.

"My name's Douglas," he said. "I'm in charge of this construction outfit. You're on the railroad property, it happens. What kind of a party are you holding?"

"If it's any of your business, we're fixin' to string up the gent you've been buyin' fresh beef of," Satan responded, his thumb toying with the hammer. "Got anything to say about it?"

The man uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Good Lord! You're crazy, man!"

"Is that so?" Satan pulled the hammer half-way back. "About two words more out of you, an' I'll fan you. Is that plain enough?"

But the tall man appeared not to notice the threat.

"We haven't bought our beef of him, or anyone else around here," he shouted. "If you'll wait a minute, I'll show you the proof."

He turned and ran toward the tents. In twenty seconds he was back, something in his hand. Without awaiting permission, he disappeared into the gloom of the South Coulee, emerging a moment later at Satan Carroll's side, his boots dripping. He thrust a piece of paper into Satan's hand, at the same instant throwing the gleam of an electric torch upon it. The paper was yellow.

"That telegram's from Mason, our general manager," Douglas explained. "As you see, he wires that he has arranged to supply us with fresh beef from the commissary at Raider's Lake. We've had a consignment already." He peered at the face of Henry Stetson, ghastly in the gleam of the torch. "That man has never sold me a pound of beef. He——"

Douglas paused, biting his words in half. Satan Carroll laughed.

"But you made a deal to buy beef of him,

all right," he guessed. "It wasn't his fault if you didn't keep your contract. Besides, he ain't denyin' killin' an O Z steer. See? He admits he's guilty."

"The kids was hungry," droned Henry Stetson wearily. "You see——"

"So I reckon you'd better get back where you come from, stranger," Satan Carroll advised sternly. "This party's gotta go to a finish. Beat it!"

He raised his gun, and Douglas instinctively threw up his hands and began to back toward the bank of the arroyo. Satan's bronco sprang forward at the touch of the spur. The rope drew suddenly taut; Henry Stetson uttered a cry, his hand going to his neck. The cry was choked off with sinister abruptness.

Then Scarface Merritt sprang from his own horse and advanced toward Satan Carroll. The moonlight gleamed dully on the surface of something in his hand. The old man was not a pretty figure on the ground, with his bowed legs and hunched shoulders.

"Satan, you're shore a son o' Hades," Scarface growled angrily. "Didn't you hear this here dry-duster explain that his wife an' kids was hungry? If you make another move with that hoss, I'll plug him, so help me!"

Satan drew rein, bewildered.

"But he killed the steer!" he exclaimed. "Didn't he say he done it? An' ain't that enough to hang the skunk?"

"It is not," Scarface retorted. "You ain't lived long enough to know the law of the range, Satan—you nor none of the rest of these here infants. Bill McMeel kin tell you."

The rope around Henry Stetson's neck slackened. The cowboys crowded closer to Scarface and Satan Carroll. Scarface shoved his gun back into its holster and elucidated, his grizzled jaws resuming their champing on Prairie Twist tobacco.

"The old range law says," he concluded, "that any gent caught killin' another gent's cows is a dirty low-down coyote, fit only to dangle at the end of a rope—onless—"

"Onless what?" demanded Satan Carroll.

"Onless he kills fer grub!"

Scarface looked around the circle of moonlit faces.

"An' grub seems to be what this here dry duster killed that there O Z steer for," he added.

Henry Stetson took a step forward.

"That's right, mister," he said earnestly. "Min an' the kids was hungry. I made a deal to sell the beef, but I never went back. We jest et it."

MRS. STETSON was still up when her spouse reentered the house, an hour later. She had not guessed the nature of the errand that took her husband away earlier in the evening. An oil lamp sputtered weakly on the kitchen table.

"Now where you been? she demanded. "A body might 'a' thought something happened to you."

Her husband's tired face was smiling through the stubble as he hung his hat on a peg.

"Something did," he replied. "I'm goin' to cut up the winter's supply of beef fer the O Z outfit—that is, as soon as they've got us fixed up in one of the ranch-houses an' fed us up so I kin stand the work."

BEAVER SKINS

AFTER the skin had been stripped from the carcass it was stretched tightly on a framework of twigs, grained (cleaned of all meat and fat particles), dried and then folded into a square sheet, with the fur side in. About twenty of these sheets were tightly pressed and corded into a bundle, and enough bundles to approximate a hundred pounds (usually from sixty to eighty skins) were made into a pack. Two packs made a mule load. Prices varied greatly according to the period and the location where they were sold, running from four to eight dollars a pound, although Alexander Majors claimed that beaver skins brought as high as fifteen dollars a pound in Missouri at one time. However the price varied, the beaver skin was the standard of value west of the settlements. The death knell of beaver trapping was sounded when the silk hat drove the old "beaver" from use, and sent beaver skins down to one dollar a pound, which left no profit in their taking. The American fur companies bought the skins on the pound basis; the Hudson's Bay Company, on a "plew" (skin) basis. In the trappers' parlance supplies were a "plew" a pound, or a "plew" a pint, the latter measurement being the one most used.—C. E. M.

CRACKING THE BLACK JOKE

By JAMES K. WATERMAN
Author of "The Sea Fox."

Wily was the Sea Fox, as the men-o'-war patroling the West African coast could dolefully testify; but it remained for a British captain to discover a sense of humor in the American slaver—humor exhibited while capture and death frowned from the British guns above him.

I

HEIGH! Heigh! Go 'way, nigger. Why you palaver me, eh? You no sabbe me? Me Boollam Bill, de bes' pilot on dis Wes' Coast Afriky; yessa, me bes' pilot on dis yah Calabar Ribber. Me got big news for Cappen Pepper, de Sea Fox. Bimeby de *Black Joke* get you too much. Let go me now or I make noise like de tunder."

The hand of Robin Hood the herculean colored American bosun of the slaver brigantine *Wild Pigeon*, tightened on the breast of the long-tailed blue coat of the speaker, who had bounded over the rail from a canoe the moment before and, with a look of haughty contempt on his coal-black features, had attempted to push by the bosun on duty at the gangway.

"What for you no answer me when I asked your bus'ness?" growled the wrathful bosun. "Nobody done allowed 'board dis ship till dey gives de exact an' entire info'mation what dey come for, savvy?"

Reaching down from his height of six feet seven, he gathered Boollam Bill up in his arms, made two strides along the deck and, whisking up the visitor's coat-tails, sat that important person's bare haunches firmly on the shining brass plate ornamenting the top of the amidship capstan, which under the fierce sun of an African noonday was nearly at a white heat.

At once Boollam Bill's thick lips assumed the shape and expansiveness of a motor tire and from the enormous cavity burst a sound which rent the air with such a clamorous vigor as to startle the whole ship's company.

Under the awning on the poop the Sea Fox and his mate, Tom Dollar, were entertaining a distinguished visitor, no less a person than the Duke Ephraim, as the King of Duketown—Old Calabar— was called.

"De debbil!" ejaculated his fat highness, his tall white beaver hat, ornamented with a broad gold band, bounding from his head as his pendulous paunch rose in fright. "Who make'm fearful damn noise?"

By the time he had recovered his hat and steadied his nerves with a stiff drink of rum and lime juice from his tumbler, which nothing short of an explosion directly beneath his chair could have loosened

from his hold, Boollam Bill came bounding up the poop ladder with the bosun giving him a shove in the rear.

"Heigh—heigh; He t'ink umself berry claber!" sputtered Boollam Bill. "Me no—"

"This sassy bush-nigger, Cappen, sah," broke in the bosun, "comes 'board contr'y to orders an' I disciperlin' him a bit, sah. He say he got berry important news. Sumpin' 'bout a black joke, sah."

"*THE Black Joke!*" blurted Cap'n Pepper, half-rising from his seat, his piercing black eyes snapping wide open, his heavy jaw sagging; then, settling back in his chair, he threw a look of grave apprehension toward his mate.

The latter lifted his rangy form from the edge of the skylight, his prominent larynx racing up and down in his lean throat, revolting at the quid he had bolted in his sudden agitation upon hearing that dreaded name.

"Hell's lifts!" he choked out. "We ain't been anchored in the river three hours when here comes a whole fog o' trouble, looks like."

Boollam Bill, quite elated at the sensation he had created, drew himself up and threw out his chest.

"Me tell you 'bout de *Black Joke* too much, Cappen, s'pose you gimme plenty 'dash'. You sabbe me berry 'liable, Cappen."

Despite his anxiety the Sea Fox grinned. Bollam Bill was widely known as the most consummate rascal on the Coast, combining with the duty of pilot that of acting as spy for the cruisers and slavers and often duping both. Captains of traders also looked on him askance, one of them complaining that Bill had once robbed him of everything about the decks but the hatch-coamings and the anchor.

It was this knowledge that restrained the Sea Fox from immediately demanding that Boollam Bill should disclose his tidings concerning H. M. Brig-of-war *The Black Joke*, a vessel the very name of which started a cold sweat on the faces of even the boldest and most resourceful of the slaver captains.

The Sea Fox deliberately placed one thick muscular leg over the other, hunched his stocky frame further back into his canvas deck-chair and surveyed Boollam Bill from under the brim of his palm-leaf hat with eyes as expressionless as two lumps of coal.

"Well!" he jerked out finally, "what's all this no good palaver ye got about that ole tub, *The Black Joke*. Spit it out an' make it short."

Whereupon Boollam Bill, though his sanguine expectations of a big present were somewhat diminished by the seeming indifference of the three listeners, rattled on glibly for fully ten minutes carefully descanting on every detail of his news. The sum and substance of his remarks was that while he was piloting a Liverpool trader from Mimbo to Jamestown he had counted three British and two American cruisers well in-shore, and when off Tom Shot bank, just before crossing Calabar bar, they had been boarded by the captain of *The Black Joke*, Sir Harry Clavering himself, who had questioned Bill closely concerning the movements of slavers in the Bonny and Calabar Rivers.

"He ask me berry 'tic'ler 'bout you, Cappen Peper," finished Boollam Bill, his splendid teeth flashing in a wide smile. "He say he hear you berry claber an' he want to see you too much."

"Which means," rasped the Sea Fox, springing up, the nostrils of his short freckled nose expanding angrily, "what ye could 'a' said in less'n a dozen words: *The Black Joke* is here to get us. What time was it when Sir Harry boarded you, can ye tell me that?"

"I tink 'bout eight de clock, Cappen, dis morning."

"H-mm! good thing I didn't wait till daylight to cross the bar; he might 'a' saw us comin' in. It's evident he don't know we're here yet. Looks like we got to run the blockade of all them cruisers goin' out, Mr. Dollar."

"Damn! Too much man-of-wars!" grumbled Duke Ephraim. "Whaffor they come to my country?"

Greatly vexed at the idea of this interference with his lucrative commerce in human flesh, the king refilled his glass entirely with rum, disdaining the lime-juice bottle proffered by his Uwei slave.

"Whaffor they name dat brig-of-war the *Black Joke*?" he asked, after gulping half the fiery potion in two swallows. "I hear plenty talk long time but no see her. She nebber come Calabar before."

"A Britisher's idee o' bein' funny," snapped the Sea Fox. "She used to be the slaver *Henri Quatre* an' when she was capt'ered they fitted her out as a cruiser

and afterward named her *The Black Joke* she was so tarnation successful in seizin' other slavers. She sails like a streak o' light an' she's become a reg'lar terror to them Congo slavers sence Sir Harry took her. What got into his head to come up here? Shouldn't wonder if Commodore Gregory had a hand in it somehow."

"Hell's lifts!" chimed in Tom Dollar. "Ye can bet he never left the Congo on his own accord; he's too fond o' huntin' el'phants. He's killed more of 'em than any other man livin'. Writ a book 'bout it, I heerd."

"That may be, but his huntin' grain turns to sunthin' else besides el'phants," observed the Sea Fox, "remember, with the 'ception o' Gregory, he's capt'ered more prizes than all the rest o' them Johnny Wars put together. But all this talk ain't gettin' us nowhere," he added passionately, kicking off his old leather slippers and feeling the deck with bare, tanned feet, as if he would communicate his troubles to his beloved ship. "We gotta have action, *action!* D'yer hear. I'll start with ye right now, Boollam Bill."

"You gimme plenty dash," purred the latter.

"To be sure. Mr. Dollar, take Bill below an' give him anythin' his heart desires, arter he has a drink o' R. an' L. (rum and laudanum) that is." He put his mouth to the mate's ear and added: "We gotta keep him under the lee o' our pistols till we get out o' this mess. Cain't take no chances on him, understan'?"

The mate nodded and the unsuspecting pilot was led away.

FANNED by his assiduous slave, Duke Ephraim had subsided into a gentle snooze. Observing this the Sea Fox went to the rail and stood looking over the river which, full of decayed animal and vegetable matter, was the color of burned soup. He looked absently at Duketown, that conglomeration of thatched mud-brick houses, conspicuous among which was the immense palaver house and Duke Ephraim's "English house" or palace. The town lay baking under the blazing sun and enveloped in a quivering haze arising from the mud-flats along the river front.

From this uninviting sight the slaver switched his gaze to the motley array of canoes bobbing at the landings, and from them to the shipping at anchor. There were two English trading-brigs and a battered old New Bedford whaler whose captain had come in to trade off the remains of his slop-chest before proceeding home.

A gleam of interest flickered in the Sea Fox's eyes as they rested on the whaleship. The next moment, keeping pace with the idea growing in his mind, he noted every detail of her ensemble—the carved rope with tarnished flakey patches of gilding on it, surrounding her name, *Martha Crabtree;* the blistered, grayish-black paint on her hull; the frayed, bleached running-gear, hanging slovenly in a bight from the fairleaders; the four beautiful boats at her clumsy wooden davits; and the large cutting-in stage hoisted perpendicularly outside of the starboard bulwarks forward of the gangway.

Presently a broad grin spread over his rugged features and facing suddenly inboard he slammed a fist into the open palm of his right hand.

"By the devil's great tail-block, I b'lieve I gotta good scheme," he exulted. "Sir Harry ain't huntin' el'phants now, he'll find out. Well, how's Boollam Bill?" this to Tom Dollar, who at that moment came on the poop.

"Sleepin' peaceful as a babe, in the dog-house, an' leg-irons on," replied the mate.

"Good. If I'd 'a' let him go he'd been aboard *The Black Joke* afore mornin' sellin' his information 'bout me for another dash. I know the critter. Ah! I see the Duke's come to life ag'in. Must be thirsty."

Cap'n Pepper himself helped his majesty to another drink.

"Duke, today is Saturday, the thirtieth of November," he said. "The Harmattan wind'ull begin to blow in a day or two an' I wanta take advantage of it. Now listen careful, Duke, I gotta have four hundred-sixty slaves ready in your barracoons by Wednesday night. Can ye do it?"

"What 'bout de *Black Joke* outside de bar?" asked Duke Ephraim.

"Thell with him. Can ye furnish the slaves."

"Me get'm two days mebbe."

"Not the kind I want, you won't. No sick or *tick-tick* niggers for me, ye know. Say Wednesday night, Duke, an' over an' above their price I'll throw in a ten-gallon kag of the fines' ole Medford ye ever smacked yer lips over."

Duke Ephraim's eyes glistened. He ran the tip of his tongue tentatively over his lower lip and got slowly to his feet.

"Berry good. Me have dem den, Cappen," he agreed, and, rising slowly to his feet, he extended his hand and gave the slaver the grip of the Egbo, a powerful native secret order, of which Duke Ephraim was the head. The Sea Fox was one of the few white men admitted to this order and held the highest degree attainable to any not of the blood-royal. It entitled the possessor to the privilege of sitting in council at the palaver house and, what was of far more importance to the Sea Fox, the help and protection of the Duke and all the powerful chiefs of the country.

With the potent aid of this order he was able to accomplish, in the short space of four days, what would otherwise have taken him a month and then only under the most favorable circumstances.

"Get the dingy alon'side the gangway with a couple o' men in it, Mr. Dollar," ordered Cap'n Pepper when presently the royal visitor departed shoreward in his six-oared gig. "I got sunthin' a-stewin' in my mind an' I'm goin' over an' dicker with the skipper of that blubber-hunter. Shouldn't wonder if he'd like to make a little money on the side."

Going below to his cabin, he took a small bag of gold from the safe, crammed it into his pocket and, coming on deck, dropped into the stern of the dingy and was pulled over to the *Martha Crabtree*. He returned to his ship in less than an hour and the mate, observing on his tanned face the smile of a man who has completed a fine stroke of business, flashed an inquiring look.

"Ever been a-whalin, Tom Dollar?" asked the Sea Fox.

The mate gave a snort of disgust.

"Hell's lifts, no! None o' them stinkin' grease-tubs for me, Cap'n."

"Too bad. If ye had ye mighta been a great help. Me an' Cap'n Blackmer, the skipper o' the *Crabtree*, is a-goin' to turn this hooker into a whaler." Seeing the mate's look of astonishment, he added, "I'll explain later; it's cost me a pretty penny, I can tell ye that now, an' we gotta shake a leg. The tide's beginning to turn so man the windlass an' get up yer anchor. The whaler an' us is goin' up the river a few miles out o' sight an' begin operations. They ain't no use denyin' the fact that we're in the tightest hole we ever got into sence we been in the bus'ness; them cruisers has us corked up tight's a bee in a bottle. *The Black Joke*, howsomever, is the one I'm a-feared on."

He glanced over the decks of his splendid craft and sighed.

"I know we're boun' to be capt'ered some time, but I allus hoped it would be an American that done it. Anyway, we got the Harmattan wind to help us when we go, Tom Dollar, an' we'll try an' crack *The Black Joke* with a red one, the red fog."

II

HE Wild Pigeon and the whaleship were moored in the little creek below Creektown by 4:30 that afternoon and the captain of the whaler immediately placed his crew aboard the slaver and began the work of transformation. Duke Ephraim also provided a gang of men to clean her copper and to give her shining black hull a weather-worn appearance by abrading the paint with pieces of grindstone. Three of the whaler's spare boats, fully equipped for the business of whaling, were swung to regulation wooden davits, two boats on the port and one on the starboard side abreast of the forerigging. Lookout-rings were placed at the mastheads and the slaver's extremely long yards, which in themselves were sufficient to awaken suspicion in the alert mind of Sir Harry, were camouflaged to appear shorter by shifting the lifts and braces inboard a little and then painting the outside yard-ends a light color.

The sails, of the best canvas and cut to fit as flat as a board, were systematically dirtied and patched with old canvas; patch upon patch after the manner of whalers. Her six guns were shored up just abaft the fore hatches and, concealed with a tarpaulin cover, looked for all the world like the regular try-works. Even the false deck of light boards, which protects a whaler's permanent decks from the razor-edged spades when cutting up blubber, was laid and two boat-steerers went round gashing it lightly with spades. After it had been plentifully swabbed with whale-oil one would have sworn that innumerable blanket pieces of blubber had been cut up on that deck. Lastly the brigantine's beautiful clipper bows were framed and boarded over so that she presented the apple-bows typical of a whaler. This false work, being nearly all above water, did not impair her speed qualities.

In fact by Wednesday morning the *Wild Pigeon*, to all appearances, was a

whaler in every detail save one. This the Sea Fox, who spent the most of the time ashore selecting his slaves as fast as the Duke's agents brought them in, noticed as soon as he came aboard that morning.

"Why didn't ye give me a stage the same's ye got aboard yer vessel?" he demanded, pointing to the cutting-in stage on the *Crabtree*.

Captain Blackmer explained that a permanent stage was not absolutely necessary as many small whalers merely slung side stages when about to cut in a whale.

"Never mind if they do," persisted Cap'n Pepper. "I wanta stage jest where ye got yours. An' make it a couple o' feet longer than usual so's it 'ull loom up like the frame of a barn. The men I'm goin' up against notice everythin'; in fac', Cap'n, if I hadn't allus been partic'ler 'bout little things that don't seem o' no account at the time, they'd 'a' put me out o' business long ago."

And so the stage, which was to figure so prominently later on, was in its place by nightfall.

Just after dark the two vessels got smoothly under way and dropped down the river. At Duketown the *Wild Pigeon*, the name on her stern now reading *John Williams*, anchored and began taking her slaves aboard from Duke Ephraim's large canoes. The whaler kept on her way for the anchorage opposite Herald Point, where she was to wait for the slaver. At daylight, or as soon as the Harmattan wind set in, they would cross the bar together; thus presenting the appearance, should they meet the eagle eye of a cruiser's lookout, of two old whalers cruising together.

About midnight the slaver joined her consort and hardly had her anchor plunged into the sullen water when trouble, swift and overwhelming, struck the Sea Fox. Robin Hood reported that Boollam Bill had made good his escape.

In some manner, not yet ascertained, he had broken his shackles and gone. Just when, the bosun didn't know, but it must have been sometime after six o'clock, for at that time Robin Hood himself had taken his supper to him in the dog-house, as the officers' deck quarters were called. The bosun surmised that Bill had flitted either when they were all busy getting under way or were taking on the slaves.

Thunderstruck at this news, Cap'n Pepper stared through the starlight at the faintly distinguishable features of his old mate.

"That's what I get for tryin' to help anybody!" he groaned. "I was a-goin' to pervide a good home for Boollam Bill on one o' Faversham's plantations. He would 'a' fetched six hundred dollars or more. An' now——"

He was interrupted by the arrival of one of Duke Ephraim's spies with more bad news. The Brazilian schooner *Ou Voador* whose captain had been drinking to the point of recklessness, had come down from up-river that afternoon and, disregarding all warning, had loaded up with slaves the Sea Fox had rejected for some slight blemish or other. Crossing the bar at sundown, he had made a dash for the open sea.

Twenty minutes later the schooner had been snapped up by *the Black Joke* and was now on her way, under a prize-crew, to Sierra Leone for adjudication.

"Hurroo!" barked Tom Dollar. "Them Johnny Wars is right on the job an' no mistake. Devil take me ef I wouldn't be as tickled as a mermaid with a new tail ef I was back home in Lewes, Delaware, right now. Bet ye a plug o' the best that Boollam Bill is aboard one o' them cruisers a-tellin' 'em all about it by the time we get outside."

"That depends," returned the Sea Fox. "If the damn cuss left us in Creektown, as he did prob'ly, he won't make it over the bar any sooner'n we do. Ye forget he's got to dodge all them canoes the Duke's got policin' the river till I get out."

Forthwith he dispatched the native spy for Captain Blackmer and upon the latter's arrival apprised him of the situation.

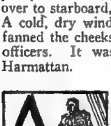
"Tain't no use turnin' back," continued the Sea Fox. "Them Johnny Wars is here to stay, looks like, an' we gotta run the blockade sooner or later, so I'm a-goin' out. Go aboard, Cap'n, an' stan' by. The Duke's man here 'ull go with ye an' pilot ye out, an' I'll foller close behind. Mebbe if they do see us they won't pay no 'tention to two old whalers pluggin' along. But be ready as soon's the Harmattan begins to blow. That wind brings the red fog an' that's my best bet now."

It was indeed. That meteorological freak of the West Coast, beginning on or about the first of December and continuing until the middle of March, the Harmattan. This wind commences at a little before sunrise and dies out about noon. It is burdened with a red dust so thick that objects are discernible only at a short distrance, especially near the coast.

Presently Captain Blackmer, accompanied by the spy, returned to his ship, leaving

the Sea Fox and his two officers pacing the poop of the slaver every cell in their brains aching with anxiety, every nerve jumping at the sudden mysterious noises of an African night—the faint, agonized blat of a goat on a far hillside as a leopard's fangs met in his throat; the bark of a baboon; the acute cries of the flying-foxes wrangling over some fruit; and now and then the whip-like reports of the ripe pods on a self-fire tree exploding from atmospheric causes. Not a breath of wind stirred the broad surface of the river, reflecting myriads of great stars.

A little before dawn the loosed sails, hanging in their gear from the yards, rustled; the great mainsail, already hoisted, partly filled and, dragging the heavy boom over to starboard, brought up on the sheet. A cold, dry wind from the east-northeast fanned the cheeks of the Sea Fox and his officers. It was the beginning of the Harmattan.



AN HOUR later, shortly after sunrise, under all plain sail, the whaler and the slaver crossed Calabar Bar. Enveloped in a cloud of red dust so dense at times that the Sea Fox could barely make out the huge proportions of Robin Hood on lookout on the fo'c's'le head, the two vessels trimmed yards on the starboard tack and, with a six-knot breeze off the quarter, laid a west by south course to run out of the Bight of Biafra.

The vessels were now running parallel to each other about a cable's length apart, the slaver gradually forging past the other.

"Hard down yuh wheel—hard down!" there came a sudden roar from Robin Hood. "Vessel right ahead, sah!"

The wheel spun and, as the slaver thundered up into the wind, her Britannic Majesty's steamer *Firefly* loomed out of the red mist, her squat bulk not a biscuit toss away.

"What ship is that?" bellowed an apoplectic lieutenant from her bridge.

The *John Williams* o' New Bedford, United States of Amerikyl" responded the Sea Fox.

"Well, what the blue blazes do you mean messing about here with all your dirty rags on in this fog? Your old grease-tub will be foul of one of our cruisers if you don't watch out!"

"An' what do *you* mean," exploded the incensed Tom Dollar, "a-takin' up the hull ocean with that steam wash-b'iler o' yourn? You'll skeer all the whales in creation. I've a good mind to report ye to Queen Victorie!"

The naval officer had not quite finished his profane peroration on whalers in general and this one in particular when, as the slaver braced her yards and disappeared in the fog, he was forced to give his undivided attention to the *Martha Crabtree*, which just then came lumbering along.

"Ye hadn't oughta riled that gold-bourn' feller that way, Tom Dollar," chuckled Cap'n Pepper. "But," he added gleefully, "ye can see our disguise is jest the proper thing. He never s'pected nothin'. I'll bet that officer 'ud be a tarnation sight madder than he is now if he l'arned that he let the Sea Fox get by with four-hundred-sixty slaves aboard. Anyway, we're safe now. Ye can see Boollam Bill ain't had a chance to betray us yet."

The mate shook his head.

"We ain't outa the woods yet by no manner o' means, Cap'n," he announced dubiously. "Thar', hell's lifts, what'd I tell ye? Listen! Thar's a Johnny War right close aboard of us a-keepin' his lead goin'."

"A quarter less twelve—by the deep twelve—an' a half twelve," came the droning chant, uncannily near, of a leadsman in the main-chains of a cruiser.

Fog is very deceptive conveyer of sound and to the two slavers, straining eyes and ears at the low poop-rail, the voice appeared to be off their starboard quarter when in reality it was directly astern.

"I can't see nothin'," complained the mate. "Wish we had eyes like Robin Hood there forrad, we might——"

Crash! Tom Dollar nearly bit his tongue in two as at that instant the port cathead of the man-of-war ripped off a piece of the starboard molding on the slaver's stern. The impact precipitated the Sea Fox head first into the green sea and his mate would have assuredly accompanied him but for the fact that the officer was holding onto the main topmast backstay at the time.

The Sea Fox cleaved the water to a considerable depth and was swept a little distance from his ship by the current before he could right himself and make for the surface. As he was coming up a heavy, chunky object plumped onto his left shoulder and a small line scraped his ear. Throwing up his hand, he grasped the small wooden handhold of a headline and broke water just as the leadsman, who had

kept to his duty despite the collision, was excitedly making his report to the officer of the deck.

"A quarter less two, sir, an' my line fouled on somethin,' sir," he explained, amazed.

The officer was more startled at this abrupt shoaling of the water than he had been at grazing another vessel, and he was roaring out the order to tack ship when the glistening bald pate of the Sea Fox appeared over the top of the hammock rail.

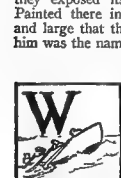
"It's all right!" shouted the slaver, leaping lightly to the deck and addressing the captain, a well knit, kindly-looking man with an immense blond beard. "This here leadsman took soundin's off'n me. Ye ain't shoalin' yer water none an' ye can hold yer course."

He blinked about, his practised eyes taking in his surroundings at a glance—the grinning crew in the clean white uniform of the British navy; the four long guns on each side which, with two bow-chasers and a big pivot gun amidships, formed her battery; the towering spars piercing the red haze; the immense length of her lower yards——

An apprehensive shiver went over him as he looked at those yards. No regular man-of-war brig ever carried yards like these. Surely Fate could not have played him such a dirty trick as to throw him aboard the very vessel he dreaded above all others!

His troubled eyes roved aft, seeking something to disabuse his mind of the suspicion rapidly taking root there. As a group of men moved away from the front of the poop to execute some order, they exposed its glaring white surface. Painted there in letters so vividly black and large that they seemed to leap out at him was the name, *The Black Joke.*

III



WHEN I see that name, Tom Dollar, derned if my laigs didn't seem to buckle like a t'gallant-mast in a squall," declared the Sea Fox, half an hour later on his own poop.

The red fog providentially lifting a moment or two after he had pitched overboard, the mate had seen him climbing up the side of the cruiser and had promptly dispatched the dingy for him.

"Yesser, I've jest put in the oneasiest an' at the same time the pleasantest fifteen minutes I ever see. That Sir Harry's a thor'bred an', when nobody didn't seem to recognize me, I really enjoyed talkin' to him. Soon's he found how matters stood an' that I was the skipper o' a whaler, he give a squint over at this hooker an' then took me down into his cabin. Sech a sight ye never saw; the man's plumb crazy 'bout huntin'. There was tiger skins an' el'phant tusks, an' stuffed birds everywhere ye looked. An' he showed me pic'ters in a book he's wrote 'bout it.

"Then he give me a drink an' was terrible eager to hear all 'bout whalin'. Haw-haw! You should 'a' seen his eyes flare like a puff o' blue smoke when I reeled off a couple o' twisters Cap'n Blackmer had told me. When I started to go, he said he'd be just tickled to death to come aboard here an' look 'round at our gear only he was afraid the fog might shut down a'gin any minute an'so he couldn't leave his ship. Mighty glad he couldn't too, I was. Well, as things stan's now, the joke is on *The Black Joke,* for fair, Tom Dollar. But we won't laugh very hearty till we get more blue water between us an' her guns."

"'Twill be time enough then," agreed Tom Dollar. "We ain't so far off the coast but Boollam Bill still can turn a trick ef he tries hard 'nuff."

T noon the Harmattan subsided into a gentle two-knot zephyr and the red fog vanished, apparently sucked up by that terrible sun which turned the sky into an inverted bowl of glowing blue enamel. The five cruisers were lying in the shape of an elongated crescent, stretching seaward and about seven miles from tip to tip. In the center of this crescent was *The Black Joke,* about a musket shot to windward of the slaver and her consort which were jogging along about a half-cable's length apart. Both vessels had their lookouts aloft and were seemingly going about their business of whaling.

At three o'clock the position of the ships was much the same, with the exception of Sir Harry's vessel which had decreased her distance from the slaver by a good half.

It was a few minutes later that Tom Dollar and the bosun, coming up from the hold where they had been overseeing the feeding of the slaves, were brought sud-

denly to an amazed standstill by the long drawn out cry of the lookouts at the whaler's mastheads.

"Ahhh, blo-o-ow; blo-o-ow! Ther-e-e she breaches! Ther-e-e she whitewaters!" came distinctly across the hundred yards of water intervening between the two vessels.

Tom Dollar straightened his lathlike frame to its full height, slammed his battered palm-leaf hat down on the deck and clutched convulsively at the opening in the neck of his red flannel undershirt.

"By great Nebbyc'anezzer's buck goat!" he exploded. "They're a-singin' out for whales. Don't that jest beat hell? I'f we'd been a gen'wine whaler we could 'a' cruised here till we grounded on our beef-bones an' never seed a spout. Now when we don't want the critters they're all ready to jump aboard. That's luck for ye, Robin Hood. What 'ull we do now," this to the Sea Fox, who came bounding up the companionway, a broad smile on his face.

"Do? I'm s'prised at ye, Tom Dollar, a-askin' that. Why we gotta carry this bluff out, o' course, so's not to excite s'picion."

"Aboard the *Williams!*" bellowed Cap'n Blackmer through his trumpet. "Small pod o' sparm whales 'bout a p'in on yer starboard bow an' 'bout a mile off. I'm goin' to run down an lower. Can't miss this chance."

"So be I!" yelled back the Sea Fox, his eyes dancing. "I paid two thousand dollars for this outfit," he confided to the mate, in answer to the latter's look of disgust, "an' it seems a shame not to use it once anyway."

Presently, while two boats were being made ready for lowering, *The Black Joke,* whose lookouts had apprised her captain of the whalers' evident designs, set her lower stu'nsails and, overhauling the slaver, luffed up under her stern.

"Oh, Captain Marshall!" hailed Sir Harry, calling the Sea Fox by his alias. "May I go with you? It will be ripping sport."

"Glad to have ye," responded the Sea Fox affably. "Get ready an' I'll drop alongside an' get ye in a few minutes."

He turned to his grinning officers.

"Now, Mr. Dollar, as soon's we leave in the boats, ye an' Robin Hood go to the main masthead with yer glasses," he directed. "You keep watch o' us an' keep's close to us as ye can. Robin Hood you watch the cruisers. You've the sharpest eyes. If ye see them Johnny Wars beginnin' to signal sudden to one another, you'll know that Boollom Bill's been heard from an' it's time for ye to go. Don't waste a minnit but pile the kites to her an' show 'em how this old gal can pick up her feet when she's skeered. If ye can take us on 'thout losin' any advantage, do so; if ye can't, make for Sant Iago, Cuby, an' wait for us there. We'll follow in the *Crabtree.*"

When within a short distance of the whales Cap'n Pepper, observing the *Crabtree* suddenly back her main-yard, did the same, lowering his two boats while the whaler dropped three.

Sir Harry, with the gray flannel shirt he had hastily donned rolled up to the elbows of his big white arms, was beaming down on the slaver captain as he steered his boat under the grim muzzles of the cruiser's gun to her gangway.

"I'm under your orders now, Captain, you know," said Sir Harry, dropping into the stern sheets; "but I'd consider it mighty good of you if you would let me harpoon a whale."

"Good thing I got some p'inters from Cap'n Blackmer," thought the slaver.

"Jest what I was a-figgerin' on, sir, an' so I left my harpooneer aboard," he said aloud. "Get into the bow an' stan' by. Yer irons is already bent onto the line. Shove off, men, an' up with the sail."

The wind increased and had shifted to the southwest, and was now bowling the boats steadily over a mass of leaping, flashing wavelets in the midst of which, a cable's length ahead, shot up the iridescent spouts of the leviathans. A flock of screaming whale-birds wheeled over the exposed surface of their glistening black bodies, swooping down every now and then to pick up the whale-lice clinging to the thick skin. A smell as of rotting seaweed suddenly greeted the nostrils of the hunters.

As they neared the pod an immense bull made a sudden breach, throwing his hundred and ten ton body nearly clear of the water, and coming down, caused the sea to boil up into a huge geyser.

Sir Harry, his blue eyes leaping with excitement, swung his blond beard around to face the Sea Fox.

"By jove! That fellow is larger than a whole herd of elephants," he exulted. "I really believe he could knock the ball off the truck of my ship's mainmast. Sorry I didn't bring my express rifle," he added.

Cap'n Pepper laughed.

"One o' them long nine-pounders o'

yourn might wake him up a little, but a rifle bullet wouldn't rile him no more'n a b'iled pea. Stan' by now to give it to him; we'll be on in a minute."

AS they ran into the pod there came the *who-o-sh, who-o-sh* of the spouts all around them, but the Sea Fox steered steadily ahead, making for the bull. A half-minute more and the boat was sweeping close by the side of the leviathan. At Cap'n Pepper's command to "Give him hell!" Sir Harry darted his iron into the soft blubber clear to the hitches on the socket. The boat sped on out of danger of the twenty-foot wide flukes which immediately flashed thirty feet in the air and, coming down on the water with a sound like a volley of musketry, began churning the sea into suds.

The boat was hove to and the sail rolled around the mast which was unstepped and fleeted aft, the heel securely lodged under the after thwart and two-thirds of the mast sticking over the stern.

"Pull me up to him, my lads!" roared Sir Harry, gleefully, stripping the sheathe from a lance. "Lay me alongside and I'll operate on him with this overgrown surgical instrument."

The men hauled in the line smartly and brought the bow of the boat up to the whale well forward of his hump.

"Ah! Now I have him!" declared Sir Harry, and made a vigorous lunge with the lance.

In that mysterious manner a sperm whale exhibits at times, just as the lethal weapon flashed down, the bull sank like so much lead, the line whizzing around the loggerhead with such velocity as to set the stout piece of oak to smoking.

"Jove, I missed him!" deplored Sir Harry, recovering the lance with the warp attached to the handle. "There's more about this sport than I imagined, Captain."

Expert boat-headers waste no time in idle conjectures but are attending strictly to business every second when they are fast to a whale. It would have been well had Sir Harry done likewise, for, in the midst of his speculations, the bull made a sudden upward rush, his broad back lifting the bow of the boat high in the air.

Forthwith Sir Harry and the Sea Fox quitted the boat unceremoniously, the one being pitched frog-like over the bow and the other describing a parabola backward over the sternpost. The Sea Fox still retained his hold on the line which had a round turn on the loggerhead, and he was pulling himself hand over hand toward the boat when Sir Harry, striving desperately to disentangle himself from the line, bumped against him.

The slaver's iron grip fastened on the other's collar and supported him so that he was enabled to free his legs from the deadly line; for if the whale had started to run while Sir Harry was in that predicament he would have been cut in two.

"Thanks, Captain," panted the Englishman as they climbed back into the boat, which had settled back uninjured into the water.

"This is decidedly more interesting than hunting elephants, I'd say."

He had scarcely resumed his place in the bow when the bull slapped the sea mightily with his flukes, shoved his huge bulk partly out of water and, seemingly attracted by the glare of the setting sun, made for the western horizon at a pace that curled the sea a foot above the forward gunwales.

The Sea Fox threw another turn of the line over the loggerhead and looked back to see how his other boat was faring. To his no little amusement, he saw that it had evidently been stoven at the first encounter and was now being hoisted to the slaver's davits. The *Crabtree's* boats had also fastened to whales and were now battling them close to *The Black Joke*, the crew of which was swarming in her rigging watching the contest. Cap'n Pepper experienced a feeling of uneasiness upon observing that another cruiser had put in an appearance further inshore. The bull, just then giving an additional spurt and straining the line, withdrew his attention from the newcomer and she, in fact everything but the business in hand, was forgotten in the exhilarating thrill of this "Nantucket sleighride."

The ships melted into the distance behind them and still the monstrous whale gave no signs of tiring. Finally, seeing that his enemy was still sticking to him like a burr, he decided on another course and, milling sharply 'round, headed back the way he had come.

For perhaps ten minutes he ran and then stopped dead, shoving his snoot perpendicularly out of water and taking a look 'round. In a moment he caught sight of the boat and, dropping his twenty-six foot lower jaw, bristling with huge ivory teeth, and belching an infuriated roar, he made a rush for the frail cedar craft.

By clever manipulation of his long steering-oar the Sea Fox avoided this onslaught, and, as the bull forged by, Sir Harry coolly buried the shining lance in him. By the merest chance, for neither he nor the Sea Fox had heard of the vulnerable spot, the lance plunged into the whale's "life", and his next spout was deeply crimsoned with blood.

The whale roared in agony as the razor-edged weapon again went home and in another moment thick blood was guttering from his spout-hole. Then the Sea Fox, suddenly remembering what the whaling captain had told him about a whale always going into a flurry just before dying, thought it prudent to withdraw the boat to a safe distance. He had barely done so when the bull made a half-breach and began dashing around in ever narrowing circles. Suddenly he stopped, gave a prolonged groan, and rolled over on his side, fin-out—dead.

IV

BOOM! Boom! The heavy reports of thirty-two-pounders startled the ears of the hunters and, lifting their exultant gaze from the dead whale and jerking their heads around, they beheld a truly astonishing sight—astonishing, at least, to Sir Harry.

Two cables' lengths away was the slaver-brigantine, tearing down before the wind and heading directly for them. Just out of range were the six cruisers in full chase behind, five of them under a cloud of canvas, the old *Firefly* belching smoke from her stack in a vain endeavor to keep in the race.

"Boollam Bill got to 'em at last," muttered the Sea Fox.

He waved his hand at Tom Dollar who was balancing himself on the rail and pointing down at the cutting-in stage that was now lowered at right-angles to the ship's side and about four feet above the water.

"Men, stan' by to catch that stage as she goes by!" Commanded the Sea Fox. "W'll leave the boat an' the whale to Sir Harry. I must say, sir, we was all mortal a-feared o' *The Black Joke*, 'count of hearin' so often that she could outsail us, but I see now she can't."

"But—but I don't understand!" stammered the bewildered naval captain. "Bless my soul, there's Commodore Gregory in the *Dale* firing at you again." A solid shot plumped into the water under the slaver's stern. "There must be some mistake."

"Gregory never makes no mistakes," grinned Cap'n Pepper. "Give him the Sea Fox's compliments when ye see him, please. An' I wanta thank ye for the pleasantest arternoon I ever see. Stan' by, boys. Here she is. Now! Catch her!"

SIR HARRY CLAVERING in his book "Black Ivory" finishes his narration of the slavers' escape with the following paragraphs of description:

With her sky-scraping spars clothed with canvas from truck to deck, her great sails reflecting the red rays of the setting sun, she burst upon my startled gaze like a crimson cloud suddenly dropped from the skies. With her forefoot smoothly turning two furrows of liquid fire she swept down on our boat, a gigantic negro steering at her wheel and fifty or more slaves squatting aft on top of her house to trim her by the stern.

A lank, cadaverous individual stood on her rail by the main rigging, calmly munching tobacco and making signs for the slavers in the boat with me to catch hold of a wooden stage which projected nearly twenty feet out from her bends amidships. I had barely time to observe these details when the shadow of this towering, rushing fabric fell upon me and I crouched quickly to avoid the stage which stuck out as menacing as a scythe in the hub of a chariot.

Of a sudden I felt the boat lighten and looking up, as the stern of the slaver flashed by me, I saw the Sea Fox and his four men clinging to the stage like so many flies.

I was alone in the boat standing there watching the fleeing craft, fascinated, thrilling at this daring maneuver when the Sea Fox appeared on her poop by the taffrail. He waved his hand to me, not derisively, but, rather, as a hunter, going home at nightfall, turns and waves a farewell to the companion with whom he has borne the heat and burden of the day. In another moment this Napoleon of slavers had vanished from my sight, shut in by the purple dusk.

THE TRAIL OF DOOM

By EUGENE CUNNINGHAM

Far across the Western deserts, in distant Sonora, an empire, wealth and power, beckoned to them; and Henry Crabbs's reckless band of filibusters pushed determinedly ahead, blind to the increasing dangers closing in on them from all sides

FROM the bleak fourth-floor room of the Railroad House where Henry Crabb and the other leaders of the Sonora-bound expedition met in final council, down to the billiard-saloon came Dallas Leigh, a wide-shouldered, handsome figure in white "stovepipe" beaver, brass-buttoned blue frock-coat, tight trousers and varnished boots. It was nearly eight o'clock of the evening of January twentieth, 1857, and for two hours the young Virginian had made one of the council, though not a member of the expedition.

Speaking always with lazy smile and habitual air of detachment, he had given with military brevity and point much valuable information regarding the region between Los Angeles and Fort Yuma, the Colorado River and the Mexican line. As lieutenant of cavalry in the regular army, until his resignation some months before, Leigh had campaigned against hostile Indians in Arizona and Texas.

Now he crossed the billiard-saloon to the barroom-door and looked in. The place was a babel; it reeked of liquor standing, liquor drunk and liquor spilled. Here gathered fifty-odd of Crabb's colonists to celebrate their last night in San Francisco. Farm boys; shop clerks; gaunt, leather-faced, buckskin-clad plainsmen; sombrero'd, red-shirted, high-booted gold-miners, their belts a-sag with Colt's and bowie; young Southerners as elegantly clad as Leigh himself—a motley company, but all alike in excited optimism, all drinking freely.

From the bar Webster Moir caught sight of Leigh. The dark, impetuously-handsome young Carolinian was flushed, his black eyes shining. He beckoned but Leigh shook his head smilingly and turned to the Clay Street doorway. He had picked up a crumpled *Argus* of that afternoon and was glancing over it when Moir came up behind and dropped an affectionate hand upon his shoulder.

"Gad, Web!" drawled Leigh, turning upon Moir with solemn face, but whimsical of dark blue eyes. "You're a desperate crew, you Crabb men. Listen to the *Argus!*

"'San Francisco's latest filibustering disgrace. Movement afoot to snatch Mexican lands. Authorities shamefully passive. For Los Angeles tomorrow by the *Sea Bird*, thence overland to Sonora, goes Henry Crabb's so-called colonization column, a hundred disgruntled politicians, Southern firebrands and miscellaneous undesirables strong. Crabb a disappointed senatorial aspirant. Other leaders of this outrageous assault upon a friendly nation are Mr. Wood and Dr. Oxley, ex-assembly-

men; State Senator J. D. Cosby; Henry P. Watkins, once a law-partner of that William Walker who now styles himself President of Nicaragua.

"'Crabb said to plan alliance with one Pesquiera, rebel against Governor Gandara of Sonora. Aided to seize power, Pesquiera will reward Crabb's "colonists" with grants of land; will also restore the vast confiscated estates of the ancient Ainza family to the heiress of that exiled clan—a lady who is Mr. Crabb's wife——'"

"Why, those insolent blackguards!" sputtered Moir, who rocked a little on spread feet. "Why, I'm minded to call the last one o' the editohs out, suh! I——"

"Nonsense!" scoffed Leigh. "The *Argus* has always bitterly opposed Crabb and his friends. This is a final thrust at them, thats all. There's a little more.

"'Who knows what these self-styled empire-builders plan? If Governor Gandara can be toppled to seat Pesquiera, then why not as easily supplant Pesquiera with "General" Crabb? A noble project! But the *Argus* believes that the fate of these latest imitators of that mad little egoist, William Walker, will as closely copy the tragic end which even now rushes upon him in Nicaragua, as their soap-bubble Castles o' Spain resemble in roseate hue and glittering insubstantiality his grandiloquent program. Upon Sonoran sands will their bones bleach!'

"You're doomed, Web! You have heard your epitaph! My, I'm glad now that I finally refused to go as adjutant. I've just about saved my life, it seems."

"I'm sorry yo' refused, Dal!" said Moir earnestly, the *Argus* forgotten. "We could use a West Pointeh mighty well; not a trained soldieh among us all. You—won't reconsideh?"

"No-o, I have a plan of my own, Web; problems of my own. It was for these private reasons that I refused Crabb's offer and Dr. Oxley's persuasions. Well, what are you doing, tonight?"

"I'm fo' Arabella's. Lowden, little Bennett and I intend to get back some o' ouh money from those shahpehs o' Tom Potts'. I'd ask yo' to come, Dal, but—I—but——"

"But Potts will be there," Leigh finished for him, smiling a shade tightly. "And Potts promised, last night, to reopen a certain argument at a time when I'd not my hand on my Colt's-butt. Don't want to see me killed, eh, Web?"

"Well, I've seen few quickeh on the draw, betteh shots, than Potts," Moir answered uncomfortably. "Yo' a'my men—yo' know this is truth, Dal—can seldom match a gunman's speed. Besides, Potts doesn't have to get yo' openly! He's allied with politicians high in the ring; with his affiliations theah's not much he daren't do. He has a nume'ous body o' shouldeh-strikehs. Mysterious devil—nobody seems to know his past, and even his activities heah he conceals. Besides the Golden Dollah gaming-house, I know he owns dives in sailoh-town and controls Arabella."

"Well," shrugged Leigh, "I'll not hunt trouble with him. I've an errand or two for tonight and afterward I'll wander about and talk to the latest arrivals."

"I wish yo'd come to Sonora with us, Dal. If it's debts that trouble yo'—well, we'll come back with full pockets, I think. What if we fail? Why, then, find yo'self an heiress, yo're a handsome devil, Dal!"

"I think I'm not a marrying man. Not that I admit your guess is right."

"No marrying man!" scoffed Moir. "Yo'—sisteh's face in that locket yo' fingeh?"

"My sister's face," Leigh lied abortly, but his fingers went instinctively to his throat as if to push lower the fine gold chain that held up the locket. "Run alorig, Web; and remember your own description of Potts. He won't like it if you should chance to win his money."

EFT alone, Leigh glanced idly down the murky canyon that was Clay Street beneath the January night sky. Where first? Little Lagoarde, the gunsmith on Washington Street opposite the Plaza, had his other Colt's; he owed Huggins, the Long Wharf saddler, for several items of leatherwork. But his thoughts returned to the room upstairs. Was he fanciful, or had Dr. Oxley's shrewd, probing eyes betrayed some knowledge of him? Leigh recalled several occasions when the doctor-politician had seemed to lead up deftly to the subject of Leigh's resignation from the army.

"It might have been wiser to take another name," he mused, "but—no, I considered that. Incog's always a strain. Too, someone from Arizona or Texas would surely have bobbed up to explode the myth. That would be worse than this, even if Oxley is wondering. What to do? To find two in all these restless, shifting thousands——"

He stiffened suddenly to stare rigidly into the darkness outside, listening strainedly. From somewhere on his left came now a measured *tap-tap*, with a hollow scraping rattle as of a stick drawn across fence-palings.

Boyishness, lazy indolence, slipped from Leigh's clean-cut face like a dropped mask. In that moment he looked like his own brother, ten years older. The tapping grew louder, approached. A long, breathless two minutes and into the circle of light from a gas-lamp across Clay Street crept a figure swathed in a Spanish cloak, a bent shape probing the sidewalk with a stick held in his left hand. Another longer staff in the right hand was dragged along the sidewalk-edge to keep him headed straight. Bareheaded, the light illumined weirdly a set, tallowy face, lifted a little as if straining for the sight snatched from him.

"Oh, God pity the blind!"

For all the mechanical, singsong note of the cry, there was a sincere agony in the voice that sent a tingling chill along Leigh's spine. Tense he had been before, and very grim, but now his face was furiously convulsed. He lifted clenched fists shoulder-high and his whole body trembled violently with the rigidity of his posture.

"Pity the blind!" he breathed in deadly intensity. "Yes, but avenge them, also! Repay to the final penny. By God! Callen—Ball, I will repay!"

For double of that pitiful groper was "the youngest major on the army list" —Dallas Leigh's idolized handsome, daredevil, elder brother. By one foul knife-stroke, six feet of magnificent manhood had become forever a sightless wreck, doomed to creep on a slave's arm about the bricked garden-walks of Fair Oaks plantation. Coming home to Virginia on leave, anxious to meet Bob, Dallas Leigh had found his brother, indeed; found him a haggard, bandaged, hopeless derelict. He had listened to the story with an intensity of cold fury none might guess from his set face.

On a Mississippi steamboat Bob had begun a friendly game of cards with the two strangers who had come aboard at St. Louis. They, the army man saw quickly, were neither the innocents nor the strangers to each other they claimed to be. So he had watched and, though unarmed, had soon detected Callen, a huge, Indian-featured man, cheating and had charged him with it. Ball, the smaller, quieter gambler, more intelligent of face, cultured of voice, than his partner, with the ludicrous sputter that seemed to preface his speech in excitement had given Bob the lie and whipped out a pistol.

Dallas Leigh, leaning in the doorway with eyes moodily upon the blind beggar, could picture that tense scene in vividest detail; Bob Leigh's darting fists that sent Ball's weapon flying and the gambler himself reeling to the floor, the overturned table, Bob grappling Callen. The two big men, alternately wrestling and breaking free to slog toe-to-toe, Bob's skill in prizering method against Callen's greater bulk and strength. The alarmed steamer officers pounding on the locked stateroom door, shouting. Ball coming dizzily to his knees, with his ludicrous sputter prefacing a signal-cry to Callen. Ball diving forward to hang about Bob's knees, Callen leaping in from behind to send the trio crashing down. A bowie—Bob never knew whose—flashing over his shoulder, across his face in one vicious stroke that blinded him for always. The door falling——

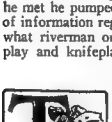
Locked in a stateroom by the furious steamer captain, to be handed over to the authorities, before Cairó was reached the gamblers had somehow escaped ashore.

Dallas Leigh had taken none into his confidence when he resigned his commission. Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee; then Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana; these had been combed swiftly and vainly. The two gamblers might have been uneasy, though Leigh believed they had no warning of his man-hunt. Always he was far behind them; sometimes the trail was almost lost. But if, between Natchez-under-the-hill and New Orleans, New Orleans and San Juan del Norte in Nicaragua, San Juan del Sud and San Francisco, he never set eyes on them, he learned much of his quarry.

Callen, a quarter-breed Indian, was a blackleg few dared cross. Prodigious as his personal strength was said to be, his skill with Colt's and rifle and bowie was called greater still. Ball was of different stripe, a fallen gentleman, perhaps; his description fitting four men of any ten, as Bob gave it. Not so much master of his weapons, though skilled beyond most men, he was the brains of the partnership. Very early in his hunt Leigh had to face a problem: if he overtook these men, what chance would he have against either? He had set himself to gain mastery of Colt's and knife; he was already a good rifle-shot. Every day he practiced—draw and

click; draw and click; first with one Colt's, then with both together. From every man he met he pumped not only what he could of information regarding the gamblers, but what riverman or plainsman had of gun-play and knifeplay.

II



ONIGHT, as he stood casting about for the vanished trail of his quarry, he knew that in all San Francisco, all California, perhaps, there was no man with whom he could not hope to match speed at drawing either belt-guns or bowie, and skill in their use, once out. But none of his acquaintances was permitted to guess this.

In the very beginning it had seemed wise to Leigh that no man should peer behind his mask. If he were one-idea'd as any bloodhound, changed overnight from a happy-go-lucky junior officer of cavalry to a killer-by-intent, none should know it. He had played the part of a thoughtless, pleasure-seeking venturer identical with hundreds of other young hotheads of his day and station, and determined to keep his rôle until he met the two he sought.

This seemed far away, tonight. By merest chance he had learned that the pair had sailed from New Orleans, ostensibly for San Francisco by way of the Transit Route across Nicaragua from Atlantic to Pacific. In Los Angeles he had not found them, nor could he locate any to tell him if the pair had remained aboard the steamer past Mexican ports. They might be hiding in Los Angeles, might be in the back-country, might have slipped ashore, even, somewhere in Mexico. Leigh was hard-put these days to keep his smiling mask.

Tom Potts, the big gambler of the city, had found a quarrel fairly thrust down his throat, simply because the very sight of any gambler, in this time of disappointment, enraged Leigh.

"But I'm coming, Callen and Ball!" Leigh muttered now between set teeth, as if his promise might span the miles that separated him from his enemies. "I'm coming!"

Mechanically he laxed his features and stared with habitual careless air up Clay Street. Light, rapid feet now tapped the plank sidewalk in the nearer darkness. As Leigh lifted his brows in idle curiosity, a woman came into the square of radiance from the door. Head and shoulders were draped in a black mantilla but Leigh sensed her youth. The grace of the lithe, slim, hurrying figure betrayed that.

At first abrupt sight of Leigh she sprang aside like a wild thing. One hand was at her breast as she cried out brokenly. The mantilla fell back from her head and Leigh stared appreciatively at the delicate oval of her face, the mouth like a scarlet flower, the great, dark eyes that watched him fearfully. Then, skirting the very edge of the sidewalk, she darted past. He turned to stare curiously after her.

Respectable women were not found unaccompanied on dark streets after nightfall. But if this girl were the lovely wanton he thought her, certainly she had flung no invitation toward him. Leigh shrugged, with sardonic smile. Just as well. He was no more a straight-lace than the average unmarried man at twenty-five; but his mind was set on grimmer things, tonight.

He crossed the street and moved in the direction of the Plaza. It suited his mood to go slowly to Lagoarde's shop on Portsmouth Square, without thought for his route. He turned corners, back and forth, intent only on coming out somewhere near his destination. There were few pedestrians on these gloomy streets; the hour was both too late and too early. Those he met Leigh regarded with absent keenness; San Francisco's thoroughfares offered various very real dangers for the unwary or the weak.

So when he saw a great, hulking figure well ahead of him he kept his eyes upon it. There was a pale moon now, filtering faint light through massing clouds and in some degree lightening the gloom. When the man ahead sprang forward lumberingly, with an exclamation faintly audible, Leigh raised dark brows in mild amazement. Then he saw a muffled, hurrying figure just beyond the man. Instantly Leigh knew it to be the girl who had passed him in the hotel doorway.

Leigh leaped forward. The girl seemed to gain; Leigh heard the pursuer's wheezing breath now. Then she tripped and fell headlong and in that instant was taken. Leigh, running almost soundlessly, was so near that he could hear her captor's chuckle. It seemed to hold both satisfaction and relief. The man was mumbling as he hauled the girl to her feet, as if this was not a capture, but a recapture.

It was typical of Leigh that he considered only his own side of this incident. He intended to rescue the damsel in approved

style. He gave no thought to the possibility of failure. In a city so well supplied with efficient roughs as San Francisco, any man might well pause to study his opponent before predicting the battle's outcome, but that was not Leigh's characteristic.

Man and girl whirled quickly upon Leigh. He stood for an instant regarding them with peculiar, almost absent smile faintly curving thin lips.

"Good evening," he drawled politely. "I saw the lady fall. It was very kind of you, sir, to lend her your hand. But now that she is standing——"

The man gaped uncertainly at Leigh. He was a six-footer, tremendously broad of shoulders, with barrel-chest. Suddenly he thrust a red, dissipated face forward.

"*Git!*" was all he had to say, but he put vast meaning into the one word.

"Señor!" the girl cried swiftly, frantically. "Ah señor, I beg you for assist! He—he hold me! He ees the *hombre malo*—the bad man! I beg of you, señor, for help!"

"Tell me quickly, señorita," Leigh slipped into fluent Spanish. "Who is he?"

IN a veritable torrent of words the girl told a story not unusual in that lawless town and time.

She and her brother, Mexicans, wealthy orphans, had sold a large property in the South. They had come to San Francisco to invest the money. Her brother, Antonio, was a wild youth and gamblers he had known elsewhere had lured him into play. Antonio had insisted upon their moving bag and baggage from the International Hotel to a small lodging-house of unsavory reputation, near the waterfront. For two days Antonio had been drunk, while she had been a prisoner in her room. This man had held her door.

Desperate, at last she had made a rope of a sheet and slipped through her window into a court. She had thought to reach the house of a wealthy Mexican who had been a slight acquaintance of her father's. But first she had stolen into the house to learn her brother's condition. She had listened in a room adjoining that in which the men had played. Antonio, she learned, was dead, killed in a drunken brawl. As she listened sick at heart, near collapse, they had been cutting cards—for her.

"Shut up, I tell ye! Shut yer mouth!" the big man bellowed furiously, as he had been doing during the moment that sufficed for her brief outline.

Now he twisted her arm. As she cried out in agony, Leigh tapped his coat pocket significantly.

"Let her go, you gutter-scum!" he said softly, but with swift rage in his tone.

For an instant the big man stared uneasily, then seemed to be reassured by the elegance of Leigh's garb.

"Ye wouldn't dare be shootin!" he snarled contemptuously. "Now, me fine gentleman, have ye heard, by any chance, o' Tom Potts? If so, ye know it ain't healthy to meddle in his play. Now that ye do know, be off with' ye!"

"I've never killed a man—yet," said Leigh aloud, very thoughtfully. "I wonder if I begin tonight. I said, 'let her go!'"

"M' lad!" The big man stepped forward, dragging the girl, to glare ferociously down at Leigh. "Have ye never heard o' 'Slogger' Kelly? Well, that's me. An' not so long ago there was mighty few could stand up to me for five minutes. I've fought the Champeen o' England: I beat 'Hammer' Long——"

"Yes, I saw you," nodded Leigh, very dryly. "My father took me to that battle. You won—won over a damned sight better man than you ever were. He fought sixteen of nineteen rounds with a broken arm and you fouling him constantly. We cheered the Englishman, my father and I. Glad to meet you, Slogger, for, you—you Dublin scum—you're going to take a beating!"

He stepped back and slipped out of coat and stock, turned up his shirt sleeves and glanced quickly up and down the deserted street. Kelly still gaped incredulously at this witless amateur, who stood a bare five feet nine, weighed no more than a hundred and sixty pounds.

"If I should lose, or seem to be losing," Leigh told the girl in Spanish, "you make your escape instantly. But I'm not going to lose tonight."

Kelly scorned to strip. Hampered by the coat that whipped his knees, the seams that bound his muscles, his fierce bull-rush was clumsy. Both in England and America in that day of bare-knuckle prize-fights, the line between professional and amateur was very faint. Leigh had been taught to use his fists by the best men available, and in childhood had been coached by his father, who in turn had learned ring-craft from that great Jew, Mendoza, ex-Champion of England.

Out of training, dissipated, Slogger Kelly would need all his skill and ring-generalship against the younger, harder man. Leigh moved slightly to the right to let Kelly go past flailing the air. It was hard to gauge his target in the tricky moonlight, but he set himself and swung a terrific right-hander that tore the prize-fighter's left ear half off and sent him crashing to the ground. Had it landed squarely that one blow might have knocked him out. Cursing he scrambled to his feet and, taught respectful caution, began to use his knowledge of boxing.

Leigh knew that he must keep away from the tremendous blows the big man was capable of delivering. Himself a terrific hitter, he could bide his time until Kelly wore himself down and a shower of blows would finish him. He, too, called into play his science, stepping deftly about the taller man, feinting, shifting, whipping in stinging half-arm jolts when openings presented. For two minutes, indeed, Leigh did almost all the fighting and whenever his fist went home it brought an agonized panting groan, from the prizefighter.

A half-dozen times Leigh barely ducked mighty swings; their grazing impact on head or face warned him that, out of training as he was, Kelly still could hit. So Leigh changed his tactics; grinning, he began to circle the huge man at a rapid trot, as if to get behind him. Kelly had no choice but to spin and keep facing him. When he tried to end the maneuvering with a rush, Leigh scampered away. Kelly began to gasp with the labor of the whirling. Now Leigh sprang in and delivered in alternation a right and left to body and face. But a heavy blow from Kelly closed Leigh's left eye, a great nugget-ring the Irishman wore gashing the eyebrow.

Leigh went almost head-over-heels, and the girl, who had watched the battle in breathless, horrified fascination, cried out shrilly. Kelly rushed forward and kicked brutally at his fallen opponent who was rolling over and over in an attempt to avoid him. Only Kelly's winded state saved Leigh then; he scrambled to his feet and dodged frantically until his head ceased humming.

He began to box coolly after this round, delivering short-arm body blows and ducking answering swings. Kelly gasped continuously, panting through his mouth. Leigh saw an opening for a clean straight blow to the face. He feinted to lower the other's guard still more, then shot in a right-hander that struck the Irishman on the bridge of the nose and cut it open. After this Leigh rained blows on Kelly from every angle, the prize-fighter holding but one aim, to close this nimble-footed torment's other eye, the bare-knuckle ringster's favorite device. Many a strong man has been beaten by his nearly exhausted opponent, simply because he could not see to fight.

After a few moments of showering blows, Leigh began to gasp audibly. His body, a moment before springy, smooth and swift of movement, seemed to sag. He moved draggingly, as if the varnished boots were leaden-soled. Kelly's swollen, battered features, the fierce little blue eyes, were alike lit instantly by triumph. He shot forward.

Almost the last of his ebbing strength he gave to that rush. Cross-fighter he was by nature, unusually foul even in that day of the prize-ring's lowest level, but with a dogged, bulldog courage.

The girl, eyes horror-widened, flung up her hand. Her teeth sank deep into its back. Leigh, swaying awkwardly, hands low as if their weight were too much for shoulders to bear, was a wide-open target for those sledge-hammer fists. It seemed to her that the huge brutal figure took hours to cross the half dozen feet. With the sharp, smacking impact of fists on flesh, she could not bear to look; had no thought to obey Leigh's order and save herself. She merely shut her eyes tight and groaned.

Kelly rushed upon Leigh, whipping back both fists. Then the sagging figure of the bloody faced Virginian moved. The feet shifted, the body moving with them in flashing coördination. Right foot forward in a dancing, glancing change; right hand following it, smashing into the puffy body just beneath Kelly's heart. Then, seemingly with a continuation of the same blow, it glanced upward—squarely to the point of the chin.

With the sobbing grunt of a pole-axed bull the outwitted professional crashed to the pavement.

III

"You—you——!"

SENORITA!"

Slowly, incredulously the girl's eyes opened. She gaped at this reversal of her expectations. Leigh was snatching up coat and hat, struggling into the garment.

"Yes. *Si como no!* Quite so. But we must be off. Friend Kelly will not remain unconscious long. He has good lungs, and probably friends within their range."

She stared at him in amazement. These never-to-be-understood *Americanos del Norte!* The man was laughing—barely able to speak, for the gasps of his inexplicable mirth!

Impatiently Leigh seized her arm and moved her quickly forward. The night was dark. Leigh hurried his charge down one street and then another, going swiftly past lighted doorways, moving cautiously through long stretches of darkness. Gradually, by the accident of his direction, they neared the waterfront. The girl, becoming aware of their location, stopped instantly.

"*Gracias a dios!*" she cried. "But señor!"

"Don't talk! I'm in no condition for another such battle just now. Kelly's employers can muster a young army to settle me and gather you in again. We'll go wherever you say, presently, but now we must put distance between us and Kelly."

"But, señor, it is that we do *not* find safety that I speak! We are now within cry of that lodging-house of the terrible brute, Potts."

Ruefully Leigh whistled, glancing swiftly about them. It was a gloomy, unsavory neighborhood, given over to ramshackle warehouses, which in turn were elbowed by small shops of reputation none too good. Sailor dives spotted the district and all night long the murky, unpaved streets were traversed by men and women whom honest folk preferred to avoid. Where they stood in the middle of a block the pallid moonlight only made the shadows darker. Leigh saw no figure moving, but there might well be a hundred unseen, watchful, speculative, unfriendly eyes upon them.

"Glad you mentioned it. Where's the house of this family friend? Stockton Street! The devil! We've been coming straight away from it. Let us hurry out of here; in this section are doubtless more dangers than we can see."

"As you say," she nodded submissively. "I—my head, it whirls with the horrors of this day. I have not thanked you—there has been no time—I scarcely know what I say. I would tell of my gratitude——"

"Señorita! Señorita! There is no time now. We must get out of this neighborhood. I shall be pleased to call upon you tomorrow and inquire if I may serve you further, but now this man Potts engages my whole attention."

"That fiend who murdered my brother!" she cried as Leigh took her arm and hurried her up-street. "I shudder at the thought that, but for you, I should be in his hands now. I listened as they cut cards for—for me. One man cried out that if he won, he lost, since if he won, Potts would be his death. Potts laughed with the others. He said that he had no fear of losing, tonight. He said that in other days he had known the most skillful gamblers in the world; those of the Mississippi steamers. I think he said—sometimes I could not understand a word, though I understand your English much better than I may speak it.

"He said that, of all the many gamblers on those steamers, but one might surpass his skill. And this man—O'Ha-ara, was the queer word—Potts said was not to-night in San Francisco to match skill with him."

"Not in San Francisco," nodded Leigh, who with the name had stopped short, forgetting for the moment where they stood and the utter folly of standing there. "But—he said where Callen *is?*"

His tone was matter-of-fact. This puzzled him. He should have screamed the question, it seemed to him.

"Callen?" she repeated with a quick turn of the head to him. "But señor—"

"My mistake. I meant, of course, O'Hara."

"*Sí!* That part I understood beyond doubt: in Sonora, bodyguard, friend, of Gandara the governor."

"Ah!" breathed Leigh, still forgetful of their whereabouts. "In Sonora. And did you, by any chance, hear him say such a name as—Ball?"

"Ball? Ball? No, señor. I am certain that he said no such name. Look señor!"

Around a corner came a staggering group, stumbling over the rough sidewalk, singing with maudlin loudness. Leigh was beyond worry now; what he had heard from the girl had seemed to lift a grim load from him. He drew his charge swiftly into the nearest doorway and they shrank back in its darkness. She nestled in the circle of his arm, clinging fearfully, yet trustfully, to him. He felt her warm breath on his neck.

The oncoming roisterers stopped almost opposite their shelter to argue the question of their course. Tighter the girl clung to Leigh and he, with arm about her.

thrust his right hand into the front of his coat so that finger-tips touched the butt of his heavy Colt's, slung slanted across his abdomen in a way of Leigh's own devising. But the men almost within arm's-length of him received only half of Leigh's attention; the soft, vibrant shape against his breast was immensely disturbing. He trembled a little, himself.

At last the group lurched off and the girl sighed audibly, moving as if to step away. But Leigh held her. For an instant she was lax; he felt that her eyes stared up at him. Closer he drew her, and closer still; he bent his head. His lips brushed her hair, her forehead, at last her cheek. Then she struggled fiercely against his arms, pounding with soft little palm-heels against his breast. Neither spoke; there was the sound only of quick breathing.

Then he held her so that his lips found hers. In that moment she ceased to struggle. Limply she suffered him to kiss her again and again. This very unresponsiveness checked him. He straightened and so they stood for an instant, still breast-to-breast.

"So," she said stingingly, "this is the unmasking of the gentleman. I thought him *un caballero*, but he is no more than another beast. Hold me, señor, I can do nothing against the man strong enough to batter senseless that huge other brute. If I cry out, it will but bring a change of possessors. I am yours; I cannot help myself. So think of yourself, señor. Always, only of yourself: My brother has been murdered and I—I dare not go to close his dead eyes. So kiss me, señor! Why should you care for that?"

"I beg your pardon!" Leigh said quickly. "You have done for me tonight more than I dared hope any one could do. I repay you by acting the brute! Please believe that I shall be only your obedient escort until you are safe in your friend's house. Come!"

HE stepped out to the sidewalk. The street seemed empty now and he drew the girl gently forward. They went as swiftly as the rough footing permitted, turning at the corner only after Leigh had peered cautiously around it. Neither spoke until they had traversed several blocks. Then the girl's grip tightened. She gave a low cry. Like stage magic, out of the darkness just before them materialized vague shapes.

A man was squarely in their path, leaning tensely forward.

"'S a woman! By God, I believe it's the Mex girl!" he yelled to those behind him.

He sprang forward with arms flung out like a wrestler's. Leigh's Colt's came out and he shot the man down. Then, snatching at the girl's wrist, he leaped sideways. An alley-mouth yawned upon their left and, with thought only of getting out of the open, Leigh jerked her into its shelter.

"Now, run!" he snapped, and down the muddy, noisome tunnel they sprinted.

Behind them rose a hubbub of excited cries, with a voice both knew, high-pitched, clear, precise of language, lifted above the others.

"Watch your shooting, now! If it's my Mex beauty, I'll kill the man who scratches her," he warned. "Get that man at your pistol muzzles or don't shoot at all!"

"Which simplifies our problem, my good friend Potts!" grunted Leigh. Then, to the girl, he added. "We'll stop here. They can outrun us, so we'll ambush 'em here. I'm not minded to be killed tonight."

He had seen a deep embrasure in the thick stone wall. Flat against the iron door that closed it he pushed the girl while he waited with pistol muzzle projecting around the doorway corner. A lightness of spirit still buoyed him up—Callen was in Sonora; surely Ball was with him. He waited for the group to come. But they were alert for tricks; they examined each doorway as they advanced. One man was well ahead; he thrust his face almost into Leigh's, so that Leigh caught the odor of liquor on his breath. Instantly the man raised his voice, with an inarticulate sputter prefacing his triumphant cry:

"B-b-bu-bu—here they are!" It was Tom Potts's voice.

He jerked up his Colt's almost simultaneously with the shout. But Leigh had only to raise his revolver muzzle and press trigger. Potts's bullet missed Leigh, and the girl cried out. Leigh did not miss. He fired again and again, emptying his weapon into the very faces of the others running up. Jamming the empty Colt's into a coat pocket, Leigh whipped out two double-barreled derringers. Potts's followers decided not to face a hail of bullets from a sheltered man. They broke and ran for the alley mouth—two of them;

three were down, groaning or still, in the filth of the alley floor.

Moving on instantly, Leigh and the girl came with no further incident into Stockton Street at last, where the mansions of the wealthy made the street a high-banked canyon. The girl held Leigh's arm lightly. They had exchanged no words since before the encounter with Potts's men. Now Leigh recalled her cry and asked if she had been hit.

"The bullet brushed my arm, burning it. No more. It is nothing," she assured.

Something about the exchange of shots between Leigh and the gambler had caught her attention, it seemed, for she looked up suddenly through the pale moonlight.

"You knew the man Potts, also?" she demanded. "He knew you? I thought so. He was—your enemy?"

"Probably he would have said so. Last night he threatened to kill me at the first opportunity. So I would have shot him, anyway, I suppose, even if—he had not had a perceptible impediment of speech when excited. That clinched the matter!"

"You—killed him?"

"Why, *quién sabe?* But if he survives, it will be proof of an amazing constitution; my .47 caliber bullet took him through the face. I think Mr. Ball-Potts is dead."

He glanced up and down the street. His thought was to finish this errand as quickly as possible and be about certain other things.

"How far now, señorita?"

"The house is in the next block, I believe. I have been there but once before, but—*sí!* Yonder it is, with the lions at the gate."

They halted before the couchant lions and for a moment faced each other.

"You will surely come, as you promised, tomorrow afternoon to receive my faint thanks?"

"Oh, but I can't, señorita. It would please me much to see you again, but this time tomorrow I shall be at sea. I am Dallas Leigh, of Virginia; adjutant of that expedition of which you have doubtless heard, that which General Crabb leads to Sonora at the request of Colonel Pesquiera."

"You go to Sonora! *Sí sí.* I have heard of this expedition. Señor Leigh—my friend—if you will be advised by me you will not go. Those politicians of Mexico—Gandara, Pesquiera, or any other—are not to be trusted. I, a woman of Mexico, say this. Do not go, my good friend! I beg you; Dal-las, do not go!"

"I must go," he said quietly. "Time will tell if you are the wiser of us two, but go I must and will. I shall not see you again, possibly. So—good-by!"

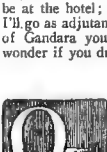
She gripped his hand in both her soft warm palms for a long minute.

"I am Carmen Montalva. I shall not soon forget how you helped a strange and defenceless girl. For what happened in—in the doorway, I—I cannot blame. Almost any man might have felt the same. So that is as if it had never been. I remember only—I will remember always—the service rendered by *mi caballero*. For that I shall pray the Virgin for opportunity to repay somewhat. So, not good-by, I give you, Dallas, but *hasta la vista*. Until we meet again!"

She drew away her hands and, before he guessed her intent, tiptoed to kiss him upon the lips, then turned and with swish of skirts was flying up the walk to the house. She turned to repeat her farewell and Leigh lifted his beaver.

"*Hasta la vista*, then, señorita," he replied absently, and turned away. "My Colt's, first; Huggins for saddle and bridle," he mused half aloud. "Crabb will be at the hotel; he'll be glad enough that I'll go as adjutant. Bodyguard and friend of Gandara you may be, Callen, but—I wonder if you dream of me?"

IV



OUTFITTING the expedition in Los Angeles to Leigh seemed to take an unbearable length of time. As he moved almost feverishly about the myriad duties none of the others seemed capable of discharging, always his mind leaped ahead, across the miles of desert between California and Sonora. Wagons and mules must be purchased; arms, ammunition and provisions provided. At last, in early February, the wagons creaked out upon the journey to Fort Yuma on the Colorado.

For three weeks the train crawled like a weary snake through the heat haze, over the desolate, yellow expanse that was yucca studded desert. Always the sombrero-red, flannel-shirted riders made straggling groups—here, there, anywhere, an undisciplined escort—about the wagons. Leigh was able to instill little or nothing of military tactics in the hundred expeditionaires. It was the pride of the motley,

hard-bitten company to assert its "independence" by flouting the adjutant's attempts at discipline.

Near noon of February twenty-first, the little body of officers—out-of-office politicians, with the sole exception of Leigh—held station a quarter-mile in advance of the leading wagon.

"Yuma this afternoon," said "General" Henry Crabb, thoughtfully. "Then Sonora, alliance with Pesquiera, Governor Gandara overthrown and Pesquiera made ruler; that should not take long—and then success! Wide estates, riches, power!"

Leigh turned in the saddle, his tanned face and dark blue eyes masked by his habitual lazy smile. He was sombreroed and flannel-shirted now, like the others; high-booted. At his sides sagged the twin Colt's of .47 caliber; a Smith and Wesson rifle was sheathed beneath his left thigh. Curiously, as he had done so many times since first meeting them in San Francisco, he glanced from face to face of these ambitious dreamers, the expedition's leading spirits.

At Crabb himself, twice a defeated candidate for the United States Senate; at Cosby, still a State senator of California; at Wood and shrewd Dr. Oxley, ex-assemblymen, both; at dour Henry Watkins, one-time law-partner of that William Walker who in this year of '57 was President of Nicaragua.

"Success." Leigh pronounced the word absently. "Success. Why, it means so many things to men—different things. To one, riches and a high seat; to another—perhaps no more than one hot kiss. But for you, General—you've never won a throw, I've been told. In Tennessee, in California, always the dice have gone against you. Well, win down here; back with a thousand fighting Americans Pesquiera's ambition to rule Sonora; hold the Mexican to his promise of reward, and you make up for every loss! The vast estates of the Ainzas will be restored to your wife. Then if Gandara may be replaced by Pesquiera, Pesquiera may be as easily toppled and Sonora annexed to the United States. All the border-folk cry out for just that, you know, since the Mexican War."

"But, Leigh, you speak of our success as if it were not your success, as well," objected Crabb smilingly. "When we win is our adjutant, the hardest-worked man, the only trained soldier, of us all, is he to be forgotten? Surely not."

"Well," Leigh parried, smiling also, "Let us win, first. In Sonora, I shall find my pay, surely."

He turned his face from them, before they could see the sudden deadly grimness which replaced his usual smiling indifference. For his mind had flashed to that pitiful picture of his blinded brother that, waking or sleeping, was never far from him; to the image of the huge, swarthy gambler he sought. Unconsciously Leigh's fingers crept to his throat. He fingered gently the golden chain that held up his locket.

Everything in life he had treasured had he relinquished to bring punishment to the mutilators of his idolized brother. Until he finished his task, he might have no more of Marjorie Deering than what he carried now—her dear pictured face in locket and in mind. He thought of that vividly lovely Mexican girl, Carmen Montalva. He had aided her in San Francisco, but no more than she had aided him, since through her he had found one enemy. Half his mission was accomplished; now he had but to come face-to-face with Callen. Well, he thought grimly, they would meet soon!

Behind the leaders now broke out a sudden chorus of shrill yells. They turned to see the train's outriders go spurring across the sand, some with lariat-loops spinning above their heads, others, their rifles and revolvers cracking, firing into the ground. Leigh swore roundly and whirled on Crabb.

"Look at them, General!" he demanded. "I've talked myself hoarse for three weeks, trying to make them understand that a military column in hostile country must preserve formation. Now they go chasing a jack-rabbit or a coyote like a bunch of schoolboys. Where's our rearguard? Our flanking parties? I tell you, General, your every hope is carried in those wagons and the train would be as helpless as a Sunday school picnic against a surprise attack. I'd ask nothing better than to lead twenty troopers against it!"

"Well, well," said Crabb placatingly, "until we pass Yuma there's no real danger, you know. You can't expect rigid obedience from such a body as ours, Leigh. As a West Pointer, of course you're used to the march of regulars."

"Nevertheless, Leigh's absolutely right," Henry Watkins broke in grimly. "We are a military column and those fools court destruction. 'Colonists' we may call ourselves, but until we fight and win for Pesquiera against Gandara's federals, we're soldiers. In my opinion, Crabb, you err

gravely in not backing Leigh's orders to the last ditch. Better have an understanding now than a disaster later on. Walker knew how to manage 'em; when we marched against Lower California in '54 the roughest red-shirt surrendered his 'independence'. He knew damned well that Walker'd have obedience if he had to shoot the last man of the party!"

Crabb moved uncomfortably in his saddle. He knew that Leigh and Watkins were right, but his was a pliant nature, non-aggressive. These unruly, belligerent fellows regarded him not as leader in any military sense, but as their representative. He was to bargain with Pesquiera for them, getting in exchange for their support the largest possible grants of land. He shrank from trying to alter his position now.

"Well, well," he said placatingly, "we'll try to get them to tighten up after Yuma. We're really at their mercy, in a way. If they should become offended and leave us, the whole expedition would have to be given up. My agreement with Pesquiera was plain: I was to furnish a thousand well-armed American colonists, this advance-guard immediately, and nine hundred more to come by sea to Port Libertad on the Gulf. Waring should arrive there with the main-body very shortly. So we must try——"

EIGH was paying no heed to the oft-heard tale. A horseman on a sturdy little bay had ridden from an arroyo a couple of hundred yards ahead. Leigh watched with hand on rifle-stock; then suddenly he smiled and spurred forward. The squat rider's arm was raised, palm outward. Leigh, also lifted his hand in the peace-sign.

"Ho! Yellow Wolf is welcome!" he cried. "But he rides far from Texas."

The other, very Indian of features and bearing, exploded in an un-Indian cackle. He loped his pony up to Leigh and pulled it to a sliding stop, to shove out his hand with the broadest of grins upon yellow-brown face.

"Huah!" he cried, and in Spanish: "I have been in the fort for twice seven suns, *mi Teniente!* Captain Jasper, whom we knew in Texas, is there. I heard that my friend came soon from California to Yuma, so each day I have ridden out to watch for you."

"It is good to see you again," smiled Leigh. "But how was it known that I came to Fort Yuma?"

Crabb and the others had ridden up and Leigh turned to them smilingly.

"Gentlemen, this is Yellow Wolf, a quarter Chinese, three-quarters Blackfoot. He wanders over the whole Southwest as fancy moves him. Best scout that ever wore cast-off army breeches. He was attached to my troop in Texas. Yellow Wolf has two vices—fire-water and shaking hands."

The scout gravely pushed his pony up to the leaders and insisted upon solemnly shaking hands with each. His slant Chinese eyes studied each face keenly and they, in turn, took curious stock of him.

The breed was turbaned like an Apache, with faded red bandanna; his coat was of beaded, beaver-trimmed buckskin. He wore no shirt, but boasted an amazingly dilapidated pair of blue woolen trousers, fringed buckskin leggings and moccasins with *par fleche* soles. His pony wore the "buffalo-saddle" of the Blackfeet, a mere buckskin cushion, but secured behind it was a bulging pair of army saddlebags. His bridle was of Mexican make, with horsehair tassels and much ornamentation of coin-silver.

The hand-shaking completed he whirled his pony and rode forward beside Leigh.

"Why," he said, finally answering Leigh's question of moments before, "it was the *vaquero* who told that you came to Yuma. He rode into the fort, this Mexican, six suns ago, asking all men for the Señor Leigh. Nothing was known of you by the officers, except that no longer were you a soldier. This *vaquero*, having said that surely you came to the fort, and that soon, rode away quickly, answering no questions."

"A Mexican? From California? I wonder—Does anyone know where he went?"

"*Sí.* One man knows," nodded the scout placidly. "This *vaquero* spoke my friend's name; therefore Yellow Wolf watched him. I followed him outside the fort and he asked many questions of the trails toward California. I think that he had never been this far north before. He rode so." Vaguely the breed flung out his arm to north and west. "He was not from California, but from Sonora like Yellow Wolf."

Leigh studied the puzzle frowningly. Why should a Sonora Mexican seek him? Indeed, how should a Sonoran know that

he came toward Yuma with Crabb? He had joined in San Francisco at the last moment. True, the train had been nearly a month on the road, for a hundred undisciplined riders and twenty wagons make a crawling caravan. Ample time for news to precede the column to Mexico, if carried by sea. But who in Sonora would be anxious to keep track of Dallas Leigh. None, he thought, unless . . . He whirled upon the scout.

"You have been in Sonora? How far into the state did you go?"

"Beyond El Altar. I returned through Caborca and Sonoyta."

"Did you—" instinctively Leigh dropped his voice—"hear or see anything of an American, a great, dark man with scarred jaw?"

Yellow Wolf nodded impassively.

"Sí! That is the American who is the friend of Gandara, the governor. They drink and gamble much together, and sometimes quarrel fiercely, I have heard. The American is a war-chief for Gandara; a great warrior, men say."

Leigh eyed the scout hesitantly. He knew the breed very well and there was no odder character on all the frontier. From his Chinese grandfather, who had somehow wandered into the Blackfeet country and joined the Piegan tribe, he had inherited shrewdness, almost an Old World sophistication. Often it conflicted and made strange compromises with the Piegan strain. Yellow Wolf would be a fierce plains warrior for weeks or months; then abruptly his bearing, his philosophy, would befit some dignified Chinese mandarin. He had always seemed devoted to Leigh, coming to the young lieutenant for orders and ignoring the troop commander generally. But he was a hopeless drunkard with opportunity, a double-edged confidant. Still Leigh felt that the scout could be a helpful ally. He was worried; if somehow his name and inkling of his errand had come to the man he had trailed from the Mississippi Valley clear to California, now to Sonora . . .

"My friend," he said slowly in an undertone, "this American is my enemy. You have heard of my brother, a great warrior. Now he is blind and it was the knives of this man and another, now dead, which took his sight. When I find this American of the scarred face, one of us will die. I have hoped that he walked by day and made his bed at night and heard no fall of my feet upon the trail behind him. Now I fear that his ears are open. This *vaquero*— had you seen him anywhere in Sonora?"

The scout turned slant-eyes upon Leigh.

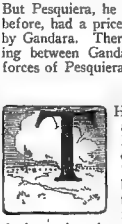
"I had never looked upon his face before, but since he rode from Sonora, asking for my friend, it may be that he was a man of your enemy's. Had I known this, I would have taken his hair. I go to Sonora with you, my friend. I am Yellow Wolf, once a war-chief of the *Pi-kŭn-i*, called by the white men Piegans. I am a man of the *Nit-ik-skiks*, the Lone Fighters; I am of the Society of the *I-kun-uh-kah-tsi*, the All-Comrades, named also the Braves. I go now to Sonora with my friend. *Sí!* There are two of us now."

As Leigh gripped his outthrust hand, Crabb rode up beside them.

"Does Yellow Wolf know anything of Sonoran conditions?" he asked. Leigh repeated the question, but the scout shook his head.

He had not been concerned with Mexican politics as he wandered idly through Sonora. He had troubled only to dodge military encampments, where a loose man of dark skin was in danger of conscription. But Pesquiera, he had heard some weeks before, had a price on his head, set there by Gandara. There had been little fighting between Gandara's federals and the forces of Pesquiera, the rebel.

V



THE train was ferried across the Colorado River and encamped outside Fort Yuma. There the expedition benefited much by Captain Jasper's friendship for Leigh, for this was the last point where supplies and fresh animals might be had. Jasper could add nothing to Yellow Wolf's account of the curious *vaquero*, though the man's persistent questioning had roused interest in the officer, bored by dull post routine.

"Whatever he wanted, I think he didn't get it, Dal," laughed Jasper. "None of the others even knew you and I knew nothing of your recent movements. I had the news of your resignation in a letter but thought you'd settle down in Virginia and manage Fair Oaks."

Leigh was still worried about the inquisitive *vaquero*. At last he consoled himself with the reflection that, if the Mexican were Callen's spy he could not now return to Sonora with information before Leigh himself had met the gambler.

In the ten days the train rested at Yuma there was no secrecy on the part of Crabb or his associates concerning their real plans; nor any horror on the part of the army men. Ever since the Mexican War there had been a growing sentiment for annexation of these border lands to the United States. Such expeditions as Crabb's, which would plant Americans on the Mexican side, seemed blacksmith work upon those desired connecting-links.

Well before Crabb's vanguard had crawled into Yuma, its approach had been rumored. The officers, at least, were familiar with current Mexican politics. They knew that Pesquiera had long been in ambitious revolt against Gandara; that he expected such backing by Crabb's fierce-fighting "colonists" as would topple Gandara once for all. But of dependable Sonoran news Crabb got little here. The very plentitude of reports coming through the border pueblos was confusing; one never knew which report to credit.

Leigh was impatient to be off. But the hundred expeditionaires enjoyed the liquor and the loafing. They were difficult to handle and it was March third before Leigh could conscientiously pronounce the train equipped and ready.

Leigh and Captain Jasper rode stirrup-to-stirrup, with Crabb and other leaders just behind. Jasper glanced whimsically from the disorderly caravan to Leigh's irritated face. He appreciated the disgust a trained soldier must feel at having to accompany this virtual rabble, but there was nothing to say. A half-dozen miles out he reined in to return to the fort.

"If I could resign this morning, Dal," he said earnestly, "I'd not stop here. No more glory to the army; we ask for war and they give us dirty little Indians! You're due adventure, romance; you'll win rich lands—Don Dallas Leigh, what? Master of the high justice, the middle, and the low, upon some vast estate."

"Adventure? Lands?" For an instant Leigh stared blankly at his friend; he had been thinking of the days between the Colorado and whatever Sonoran village housed his quarry. Just in time he recalled his supposed quest. "Oh, yes! Of course!"

Jasper stared at him curiously for a moment, then turned to Crabb:

"Good luck to you, sir," he said warmly. "I understand that in the California elections you twice missed the senatorial toga by a handful of votes. Well, who can foretell the future? A year, five years, from today, that ambition may seem childishly petty! When you finish your work down there, it may well be that Washington will greet 'United States Senator Crabb, from Sonora' !"

Crabb's mobile face worked strangely and he shook hands without an answering smile.

"Stranger things have happened," he nodded solemnly. "Stranger things——"

In late afternoon Yellow Wolf crawled from the wagon into which he had been tossed, dead-drunk, in Yuma. He found his little bay and rode up to where Leigh strove to get the mob-like riders into something like military formation. After a few keen glances at the ragged column, the breed shook his head contemptuously.

"These men are like children. They should pray to their gods to protect them. In this country are the Cocopas. They do not fight like my people, nor like any of the horse-Indians. They are not brave, like the Apaches or Comanches or Lipans. But like that little rattlesnake which white men call the side-winder, which moves only at night and may sting from beneath the very moccasin at any time, so do these Cocopas crawl upon their bellies in the darkness to steal horses and lift hair. I will scout for you, my friend, but one pair of eyes cannot see all."

In the days that followed Leigh was alternately furious at the swaggering riders who ignored his plan of march, and inclined to a sort of fatalistic apathy like that of the other leaders. Crabb pointed out that Pesquiera's forces lay between the train and the federals of Gandara; he would not regard as a menace the distant riders—Indians or Mexicans—silhouetted against the skyline from the moment Yuma was left behind. But Yellow Wolf reiterated his warning against the Cocopas.

ON a night of the second week a dozen or more Cocopas wriggled unheard through the horse-guard, but Yellow Wolf had posted himself nightly at this point and his scalp-yell brought the guards. They ran up to find the scout dangling a scalp, but the other raiders had simply melted into the night. After this even Leigh had no cause for complaint on the score of vigilance at night. Twice afterward there were alarms, but when, three weeks later, they neared Sonoyta, not an animal had been stolen and

the American tally was four Cocopas, three to the belt of Yellow Wolf.

Leigh became more and more indifferent to the conduct of the men. Not only did he share Crabb's belief in the expedition's sheer luck, but the aim of the leaders was not his aim. There was always before him that dark, malignant face that his brother had described. What he did he did more or less mechanically, wearing his mask of careless interest; seeming to be as engrossed in dreams of conquest as any other. But as they neared the border Callen's picture grew more vivid. Leigh's thoughts kept him awake at night; his dreams waked him from sound sleep to get up and roam about the camp and, under shelter of the darkness, practice and repractice drawing and clicking his heavy revolvers. His speed, already dazzling, became a thing almost uncanny.

When Crabb sent ahead a party of twenty to gather beef and corn against the train's arrival, Leigh sent Yellow Wolf with the foragers. The scout was to learn what he could of Callen's whereabouts; whether the gambler had sent that *vaquero* as spy; if he guessed that Leigh approached. The column neared Sonoyta and still no word came back to the leaders.

They found the village warden waiting on the outskirts of the slovenly huddle of gray-brown adobes, a paunchy, stolid man. Leigh, even as he turned Crabb's greeting into courtly Spanish, glanced uneasily about for Yellow Wolf and the foraging party. There was an atmosphere of tenseness about the faces peeping from house doors. He asked news of Pesquiera and the warden's heavy face altered slightly, a shadowy change. Was it malicious? Leigh stared hard.

"General Ignacio Pesquiera, Substitute Governor of the State, Commander-in-Chief of the Army of the Frontier—" the pompous title rolled from the warden's thick lips with an unction that Leigh liked as little as he liked the Mexican's face—"intimate friend, faithful ally, of his Excellency, Governor Gandara, is in Hermosillo, or, perhaps, in El Altar or Arispo. He knew of your coming so he gathers now all the forces of the state to repel this bloody horde."

Instantly, before he translated for Crabb, Leigh's hands dropped to Colt's butts. He glanced flashingly about; before, at the adobe walls which might hide an ambush; behind, at the wagons crawling up, with their ragged guard of riders. Curtly, then, he told Crabb of Pesquiera's desertion of them, his invited allies; of this evident peace with Gandara. Leigh remembered, then, that Carmen Montalva had warned him of the treacherous shifts of Mexican politicians.

Crabb seemed to wilt in his saddle. Leigh watched him intermittently; he could understand how hard it must be for Crabb to understand, how much harder to believe. Crabb had talked much to them all of his conferences with Pesquiera the year before, of the vast schemes the two had envisioned. At last, when his hundred incredulous questions had been answered—or, more significant still, evaded—through Leigh, Crabb slouched dumbly in his saddle, deaf to the excited, anxious talk around him.

Filling in the gaps of the warden's statements, it was not hard to build the complete story: Pesquiera had received high office as reward for making peace with Gandara. Now his connection with the Americans became very embarrassing. In self-defense he must not only disavow any dealing with them; he must be loudest in denouncing the "bloody invaders". This he would do the more willingly, since now he had no need of foreign aid.

A paper stuck upon a house wall caught Leigh's eye; he spurred over and jerked down the proclamation, to scan it swiftly. It was signed by Pesquiera. Leigh read the last paragraph aloud:

"'Let us fly to chastise, with all the fury which can scarcely be restrained in hearts full of hatred of oppression, the savage filibuster who has dared in an evil hour to trend on the national territory and to provoke—Madman!—our anger. No pity, no generous sentiments, for that rabble! Let them die the deaths of wild beasts!'"

Leigh, looking about for Yellow Wolf, had still his odd sense of aloofness from all this tangle. Their adjutant, their skilled soldier, he was of course; he would serve them well as such. But his own course was set. Whether they turned back or stubbornly went on to take openly what Pesquiera had promised to give, he faced only south. Somewhere within fifty miles was Callen.

"Well?" said Senator Cosby at last, glancing somewhat nervously about him. "Do we turn back, Crabby? This alters everything, of course: We face an aroused and hostile countryside; we are disowned by our ally. It seems to me that we have a choice here between a wise course and a foolhardy; and wisdom dictates a retreat

while that is possible. We can't found a colony if Pesquiera has turned against us!"

"Turn back?" Crabb glared at Cosby, his face bitterly set. He was gripped, Leigh fancied, by the strongest determination of all his life, recollecting, as he now must, his many failures. "Slink draggle-tailed back to California after all our high hopes? No! We go on! There are a hundred of us here. Within a month Waring will land at Libertad with nine hundred or a thousand more, enlisted in San Francisco. If the men will follow me, we'll go on to Libertad and await the others. We'll found our colony and be damned to Pesquiera for a treacherous hound!"

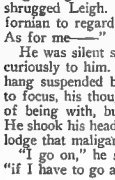
"How do you vote, Leigh?" asked Cosby, doubtfully. "The men—what will they say?"

"Why, the men have been in California long enough to make their vote guessable," shrugged Leigh. "You can't get a Californian to regard Mexicans as dangerous. As for me——"

He was silent so long that all eyes came curiously to him. Callen's face seemed to hang suspended before his eyes, to draw, to focus, his thoughts. He had that sense of being with, but not of, this company. He shook his head impatiently, as if to dislodge that maligant image.

"I go on," he said with vicious energy, "if I have to go alone!"

VI



AS THE wagons came creaking into the village, camp was made. Then Crabb called a conference to decide the company's direction. Leigh did not at first join the circle. He had gone to warn Sonoyta's warden that any Mexican crossing the deadline about the American camp would be shot. As he turned back, the foraging party rode in with cattle and corn, Yellow Wolf riding well ahead. The scout loped up to Leigh.

"My friend," he greeted. "The big man is still with Gandara; but a war-chief no longer, since Pesquiera smoked a pipe with the governor. Pesquiera speaks against all white men, but Gandara listens with only one ear."

"One ear? What do you mean?" demanded Leigh frowningly.

"Why, he does not give the big man to his soldiers, nor drive him from Sonora, as Pesquiera would have him do. But no longer does he let the *Americano* lead war-parties. Everywhere the Mexicans run back and forth crying, 'Death to all *Yanques!*' I rode almost to Caborca. I saw them taking up their guns."

Leigh turned toward the council with this news. Before he reached the noisy, excited gathering, he knew its decision, the decision he had forecast. Almost without a dissenting voice they clamored to go on; to establish an American colony in Sonora in the face of whatever opposition might come.

At dawn the train creaked forward toward Caborca, the American contempt of Mexicans again defeating Leigh's attempt to make of wagons and riders a military column capable of repulsing attacks. Even the riders, who all that day hovered about, brought only amusement. The guard that night was vigilant, but the next day they rode in their usual careless disarray.

The column was moving in the black hour preceding dawn of All Fools' Day, the mounted guard in ragged, straggling groups, as always. Leigh and Crabb, with Yellow Wolf vanished somewhere in the van, led the train. Just ahead lay the hamlet of Caborca, only a few miles from their destination, the tiny port of Libertad on the Gulf of California. With daybreak they glimpsed the broad green fields that surrounded Caborca, on right and left of the rough trail. Silently Yellow Wolf materialized beside Leigh.

"It is in my mind that more than the baby wind moves yonder," the scout grunted uneasily. "See how the wheat waves. If you will halt the wagons, I will ride on and see if men are yonder."

Leigh nodded, but Crabb overruled his suggestion that the train wait for the scout's report. They moved on in the wake of Yellow Wolf. The whole column was enveloped in the head-high wheat when Leigh saw Yellow Wolf flat on his pony's neck, returning at a mad gallop. There was no time to wonder at his speed. From both sides of the road came heavy volleys. Men crashed from saddle and wagon seat to the trail. Maddened horses rushed in every direction; mules reared and plunged; wagons were overturned. It was a scene of utter confusion; worse, even, than Leigh had feared from the beginning. And all the while came those volleys from the wheat.

Leigh stood up in his stirrups, tightly reining his sorrel, and saw that it was impossible to reform these undisciplined

men. He shouted to them to make for the houses of Caborca, a quarter mile ahead. Again and again he shouted, and at last the milling men, who fired blindly at their invisible attackers, lashed the teams forward—those which could be moved. Bringing the fallen Americans with them, to the last man, they burst out upon the Calle Grande, the main street of Caborca. Here they were met by a heavy fire from a body of Mexican soldiers.

Taking shelter behind the wagons, behind houses or any other cover that offered, the Americans returned the fire. Leigh moved from point to point, distributing the group until they made a firm line, and soon the men recovered from the shock of the ambush. Twice they hurled back direct charges, the efficiency of American rifle-fire, as always on the border, being more than peon soldiers would face.

Taking advantage of the lull following the second charge, Leigh ordered abandonment of the wagons. The Americans leaped up and flung themselves into a row of adobe houses on that side of the Calle Grande opposite the parish church. Taking stock, they found that the skirmish in the wheat and the fight here in Caborca had cost two men killed and eighteen seriously wounded, three fatally.

The Mexicans, who early had barricaded the church door against the Americans, now occupied the church and houses opposite the American line. From windows and loopholes they kept up a heavy, ineffectual fire. The Americans, protected, easily holding their own, were cheerful. Crabb and the majority of the men overruled Leigh's suggestion that they should attempt withdrawal through the rear doors of the houses and retreat toward the border. They believed that the Mexicans would soon give up the attack.

Yellow Wolf slipped in and reported that nearly a thousand Mexicans were in the village; instead of withdrawing, they were moving to surround the American position. As proof that his own way had not been clear, he held up three Mexican scalps.

Now, without warning, came a deep-toned report. A six-pounder ball crashed through a mud brick wall and guillotined a rifleman. The Mexican artillery had come up. That murderous first ball was really the beginning of the end. Where the houses might be held indefinitely against musketry, under artillery fire they were mere death-traps.

"Flat on the floor, everybody!" cried Leigh. "Focus on the cannoneers! One of them down is worth ten infantrymen killed."

Swiftly he went up and down his line

with the same directions. He now saw but one chance for the Americans: to withdraw and cut through the Mexicans, make a mobile column and rush for the border. From one of the men he learned that Crabb was talking with a stranger, just arrived, in an end house. Leigh crawled through the passages knocked in the sidewalls, from house to house, until he came to the end. There he found Crabb, talking with a swarthy bareheaded man who towered above all in the room.

With the first glance at the newcomer Leigh stopped short. For him there came a void; he heard nothing, saw nothing but that dark, malignant face with long white scar upon the jaw. For a moment he stood motionless; then almost without consciousness of what he did, he moved forward, to cross the room with short, springy catsteps, his hands stiff, hooked like claws above his revolver butts. Callen stared absently at Leigh for an instant. Then the pupils of his black eyes dilated; an odd, strained tightness came to his face. Leigh had no need to give name and business; his features enough resembled his brother's, and the bitter hatred spoke so plainly from his eyes, that Callen understood.

Flashingly, Callen's hands twitched toward his belt. So did Leigh's, but Crabb, who had been gaping at them both, sensed their intent and leaped between them.

"Stand aside, Crabb! Damn you, stand aside!" cried Leigh thickly. "I came to Sonora just for this meeting. I have hunted this man for nearly a year."

"No! You have no right to think of private quarrels now," Crabb objected. "The men depend on us, their leaders. We're surrounded, fighting for our lives. We can't spare a man, much less you, our trained soldier. Wait until we're out of this predicament."

Leigh could not dispute the justice of Crabb's objection, but the settlement he had brooded over so long bulked larger than even their present desperate plight. It was hard to drop it, now that he was at last face to face with Callen. But finally he shrugged, if sullenly.

"It's a truce," he conceded. "But only until we've settled these Mexicans. Then I kill you, Callen."

"Shootin' off yo' mouth won't do it, sonny," grinned the gambler.

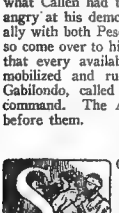
"I promise you, you'll get your pay!" Leigh rejoined hotly. "You're not clever, Callen. Your *vaquero*, sent to spy on me, bungled. He——"

"What *vaquero*?" Callen's puzzled face made even Leigh doubt for a moment. "Spy? What would I do with spies? Think I'm afeared o' yo'? Afeard o' anybody? Why, sonny, I eat 'em yore size!"

"Callen, I wish you'd take charge of this end," Crabb broke in hurriedly. "And you, Leigh—let's look over the situation."

Hastily he drew Leigh after him. Shouting above the din of the firing, he repeated what Callen had told him. The gambler, angry at his demotion, had quarreled finally with both Pesquiera and Gandara and so come over to his countrymen. He said that every available Mexican was being mobilized and rushed to Caborca; that Gabilondo, called the "butcher" was in command. The Americans had a battle before them.

VII



It proved during four grim days and nights. Though on both sides the firing slackened with darkness, the Americans were so ringed about that any attempt to cut their way out seemed foredoomed to failure. Callen proved a fierce, dependable fighter, with a natural ability to lead. Leigh kept away from that end, finding much to occupy him elsewhere, as the six pounder hammered the adobes.

"This position's untenable," Leigh told Crabb decisively on the fifth day. "The church is the only defensible building in Caborca. We have either to take the church or try to cut through the rear line and make for the border. With barely fifty men able to fight, and our wounded to consider, that last is a desperate move."

"Whatever you decide, Dallas," said Crabb, glancing haggardly about him.

"The church, then. I'll take twenty volunteers. We'll carry a keg of powder to blow down the church door. The men left here will cover our attack as much as possible by firing over our heads."

From fifty-odd volunteers Leigh chose twenty. Two men waited beside a powder keg pierced for a rude slow-match, ready to lift it for the rush into the street.

"I'm coming with you," said Crabb, his pale face set and determined.

"Yeh, an' so'm I." Callen grinning ferociously, pushed through the group and swung the powder keg up to his shoulder.

The litter of beams and battered mud bricks was cleared from before a splintered door. Leigh, with a quick glance through the smoke murk at his sally party, gave the signal. The door was jerked away and Leigh, with Crabb and Callen beside him, leaped into the street. Behind them the riflemen left to garrison the house opened a hot fire on the Mexican position. In the first step forward Leigh's sombrero left his head. Callen grunted as a bullet took him in the arm. A ball in the shoulder spun Crabb around like a weather-vane. He staggered to his knees, then was up again.

Heads down, bodies bent, they raced forward as through a pelting rain-storm. They were targets for half a thousand Mexicans in the houses up and down the Calle Grande; halfway across the street a third of the sally party was down. Callen was shaking his head and bellowing like an enraged bull. The screening fire of the Americans could not reach the protected Mexicans; a very hail of bullets tore into the melting group in the open. Then Callen, wounded in a dozen places, stumbled. The powder keg went bouncing away across the dusty street. A bullet smashed Leigh's ankle.

"Back!" shouted Leigh, seeing the hopelessness of the attempt on the church.

As they turned, Callen swayed on his feet, lurched a step or two and began to crumple. Without thought, Leigh, barely able to hobble, himself, thrust out his arm to the gambler. A fierce-faced, turbaned figure shot forward and Yellow Wolf was supporting, not Callen, but Leigh.

Back in the houses, the steady rattle of rifle fire continued. The six-pounder was hammering the adobes to ruins. With dusk Mexicans crept near enough to fire blazing arrows into the thatched roofs. The men in the rooms beneath tried to blow off the flaming thatch by exploding powder beneath it. They succeeded only in injuring some of themselves. The heat and smoke grew almost unbearable. To Leigh, hobbling up and down in the murk, it was like a den of wolves, as fierce eyes turned in desperate questioning to him. Well, he thought grimly, these trapped wolves soon would make a last dash out which the Mexicans would long remember. A hand caught his leg.

Leigh bent and found himself staring into the face of Callen and all his old rage at sight of the gambler swept back to him. He forgot all but his feud with the man. But Callen was grinning at him—mockingly, it seemed in the semi-darkness.

"Goin' out, sonny," he gasped. "Got mine—in the street. Yo're—euchred. Goin' out, so—might's well own up. Seen yo—handle yore belt-guns. Faster'n me. Yo'd have got me—anyway. Tom Ball 'twas his knife—blinded yore brother." He dropped back.

A hand closed on Leigh's arm, jerked him around. He looked into Yellow Wolf's face. Suddenly he was conscious of silence; there was no firing anywhere. The scout stared down at Callen, then looked inquiringly at Leigh, who nodded.

"Good. Better if he had died by your gun, though. Now, my friend, the Mexicans make talk with your chief. He asks for you to speak for him."

Leigh found Crabb in the doorway of a house, listening to Gabilondo, the Mexican commander, who spoke from the church belfry.

"Gabilondo offers terms," Crabb said hastily. "We can't stay here longer; all the houses are afire. I don't understand exactly what he offers, but we are practically in his hands. Talk to him, Dallas."

Gabilondo repeated his offer:

The Americans were dead men if they resisted longer, but if they laid down their arms they would be treated as prisoners of war. By order of Governor Gandara, they would go to El Altar for trial as filibusters.

A clamor rose when Leigh had translated. Some wished to fight to the last ditch rather than trust any Mexican promise; they would cut through and turn toward the border. The majority, however, agreed with Crabb that acceptance was their only hope. On one point both factions joined: the treatment of the wounded.

"Oh," Gabilondo cried earnestly, "for the wounded I have a physician, señor. Upon the word of a *Caballero*, they shall be well-tended. I promise, señor."

"A Mexican promise!" bellowed a gaunt Texan. "Remember the Alamo! Remember Goliad!"

"Tell him we accept," said Crabb decisively, silencing with upraised hand the Texan and other last-ditchers.

THE Americans laid down their deadly rifles, unbuckled revolver belts and knife sheaths, and one by one stepped out to cross the Calle Grande to the church door. Yellow Wolf caught Leigh's arm.

"My friend, Mexicans are not men of honor," he warned. "They cannot be trusted. Now your enemy is dead, have nothing more to do with these men. Let us slip through the dogs of no eyes and ears and take horses; then ride for Fort Yuma."

Leigh shook his head, motioning to his wounded ankle.

"I could not make it, my friend. Besides, as you say, my enemy is dead. My real errand in Sonora is finished. Now I am truly a chief of these men; whatever is to be their fate must be, if I remember my honor, mine also. You are not so bound; you may easily slip through the Mexicans. Go, and take my thanks with you."

"I have heard my father's father say that he once wore the button of a mandarin of the Chinese Empire," remarked the scout with seeming irrelevance. "He was a very wise man, though his gods were not the gods of the *Pi-kuin-i*. I have heard him say that in honorable friendship are men most pleasing to their gods; that if a man came to death through faithfulness, he need have no fear of facing his honorable ancestors. So I stay here with my friend. It may be that I can help him. But if there comes a time when I cannot aid my friend, but may save myself, then I shall go."

As each American stepped through the church door he was bound with rawhide thongs around his arms, then led to the Mexican barracks. Crabb, first inside, was put alone into a little room with a guard before the door. In the barracks the worn, haggard survivors of six days of siege sprawled upon the dirty floor. They were apathetic with the accumulated fatigue of continuous fighting; even the pain of the tight thongs could not keep them awake. Leigh and Yellow Wolf were side by side and it was the breed's shoulder which finally butted Leigh awake. He opened his eyes stupidly. Through the narrow window high in the adobe wall the first light of the gray dawn shone cheerlessly. A Mexican sergeant stood over him, with a paper in his hand.

"You are the prisoner who spoke with General Gabilondo?" demanded the sergeant. "Then, as I read, translate for the others."

Still numb of mind with weariness, mechanically Leigh turned the florid opening sentences into English. Suddenly he stopped short to stare incredulously at the stolid non-com. This was an order from Gabilondo; the Americans would be shot at sunrise.

Bitterly the men cursed Crabb's folly, and their own, in trusting a Mexican promise. They strained desperately at the tough rawhide bonds, bent on snatching weapons from the Mexicans, attacking them with bare hands. But they had been well bound; nor was time given them for much effort. Through the little window the yellow sunlight streamed and with it came the Mexican soldiers. In squads of five and ten the prisoners were hauled to their feet and marched out to the outskirts of Caborca.

Leigh had a sense of numb incredulity that mastered every other emotion. This was exactly like some vivid nightmare. Horribly real, but still he had that sense that, if he would determine to awake, it would pass. Even when he found himself standing, one of a row of prisoners, facing stolid, swarthy peon soldiers, he did not believe, because he could not believe, that in a moment he would have crossed from this familiar world into another which he had never considered more than carelessly.

The muskets came up. At a word of command the soldiers fired. But the staring eyes of the prisoners had effect even on barbarous peon nerves. Bullets missed by feet. A vibrant, scornful voice beside Leigh was taunting the Mexicans: set him free and, bare-handed, he, a war-chief of the *Pi-kun-i*, would carry Mexican hair with him into the Place of Shadows. Suddenly his chant ceased.

"Can you run, my friend?" he muttered to Leigh.

"No. I can barely stand; but if you can, go. Nothing but death is here."

Yellow Wolf sprang forward, with hands free. He had flashed across and snatched a knife from a soldier's belt, stabbed the man and hurled himself through the soldiers, before any moved. A Mexican officer sat on a fine horse outside the line. Yellow Wolf yelled shrilly and flung himself at the horse. He leaped up behind the officer and the animal lunged toward open country. Only for a moment did the beast carry double. Then the officer crashed to earth and Yellow Wolf was galloping off.

Gabilondo himself took charge, raging furiously up and down to bring order from the confusion. The Americans were turned with backs to the firing squads. Leigh heard the report of the volley, felt a stinging thump on the back, exactly like a stone striking him; as he staggered there came a stunning blow on the head. For an instant it pained excruciatingly; then a rolling wave of blackness roared up to engulf him.

EIGH opened his eyes and stared vaguely upward through a cool, pleasant dusk. His mind seemed to begin working abruptly, turning over tag-ends of disconnected incidents. Only for an instant; then he remembered the fight—the charge against the church—the surrender. He tried to sit up and, because of some strange heaviness of body and weakness of muscle, only managed to twitch his head slightly. Instantly a cool, soft hand was laid upon his forehead.

"What, awake at last? *Dios mio!* And the fever is gone."

"What fever?" He intended to put the impatient question in a clear voice, and was surprised at the tiny whispering sound he made. He tried again, and this time managed a husky but louder tone.

"Why, your fever, Dal-las. You deny it? Perhaps you will deny also, being a *muchacho* of the stubbornest, as Old Maria and I know well, that I—we—have nursed you for two weeks."

"Two weeks! Why this morning in Caborca——"

"*Si!* This morning—two weeks ago! Now be still. You must not talk or excite yourself, my stubborn *muchacho.* Such a boy! Always he must do what he resolves to do. Did not I, Carmen Montalva, warn you in San Francisco that Mexicans, Pesquiera or any other, are not to be trusted? Did I not plead with you not to join the man Crabb? Your stubbornness brought you to the very door of death.

"From San Francisco I came by ship to Guaymas and, learning there that Pesquiera had treated with Gandara and would turn upon the Americans he had asked to come to Sonora, I sent my cattle foreman, Pedro Morales, riding to Fort Yuma. He had my orders, to find you and warn you that only death awaited you. I think he missed you; at least he has not returned. However that may be, you came on—to that morning in Caborca!

"I had my own man in the village, but too late he rode to tell me that Gabilondo would shoot the last American. I killed a horse between this, Miraflores, and the village, but still arrived a half hour late. Ah *Dios, Dios!* My heart sank with the sight—but you I could not find, my Dal-las. Not until a *muchacho* pointed to a hut. Then I found you, with two old witches quarreling over your clothing and your jewelry. Ah, those she devils!

"I cleared me that house with the lash of my quirt. I was mad, I think! In San Francisco you saved me from a shame worse than death; you avenged my brother's murder. Then I said that one day I would repay and, as I looked at you, I was torn with the thought that I had failed. Suddenly from the shadows came a fearsome figure; I looked up from where I knelt beside you.

"'It is not good,' said this man, 'that my friend's body should be left to Mexican vultures.' Then I saw that this man was no Mexican, for all that he wore the clothing of a peon. He stooped suddenly and swore that your eyelids fluttered. He put to your mouth a knife-blade—first wiping blood from it—and tiny mist formed!

"Well, we bandaged you somewhat, and dressed you. We wrapped you in a blanket and slung a litter between two horses. Then, saying that because you had been a friend of my brother's we took you forth to bury you, we brought you to Miraflores. Old Maria is often called a witch, for her amazing skill in healing. You had wounds in your ankle and back, and one bullet had grazed your poor head."

As the soft voice crooned on, telling of how they nursed him while the grim figure of Yellow Wolf kept faithful watch, Leigh slipped away into a sleep that lasted seventy-two hours. He waked feeling very much himself, though incredibly weak. Yellow Wolf squatted beside his bed, smoking a Mexican corn-husk cigarette. He grinned at Leigh.

"*Huah!* I greet my friend, who has been down to the Place of Shadows."

Carmen darted in from the patio and Leigh, remembering what she had done for him, studied her face with a painful intentness and found it flushed, the scarlet mouth smiling tenderly, the dark eyes tearfully happy. He talked to her and to the scout, but in his mind a problem was revolving. In the week that followed, while in him grew an intense hatred for the Mexican land and an equally strong longing for his own Virginia, always this problem occupied him. He was not especially vain, but the girl's trembling joy at his recovery could hardly be misinterpreted . .

So in a cool forenoon, when he lounged comfortably, half-sitting, half-lying upon a cot of rawhide thongs in the patio, he faced his dilemma squarely. With making up his mind, he felt lighter of heart than he had been for days. She came over to smooth a pillow and he caught her gently by the hand.

"Carmen, Carmen," he said softly, "in all the world there is not another like you. There is a question I have wanted to ask you—will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

All the color left her face as, with widened eyes, she stared down at him. Then suddenly she sat down upon the edge of the cot and looked deeply into his dark blue eyes. One corner of her scarlet mouth was caught between her teeth.

"Do you—love me so greatly, Dal-las?" she asked softly.

He nodded gravely:

"From the moment I saw you in San Francisco," he answered quickly. "As we came south, there was with me always the picture of you as I saw you last, standing in the doorway of that house on Stockton Street. I thought always to finish the work I had undertaken, then—to find you, my dear."

Her mouth trembled and she lowered her head. When she raised it her slim shoulders were quivering slightly. She put out a cool, slender hand and gently touched his neck, lifting the fine gold chain that

held up a locket. He smiled at her and drew out the locket, opened it.

"My sister," he smiled. "Some day I hope that you shall know her."

"Your—half-sister? For in your delirium, my Dal-las, you called her Marjorie Deering——"

Then suddenly she could restrain herself no longer. She laughed in his very face, laughed until she slipped to the floor and buried tearful face in her arms upon the edge of the cot.

"Oh! Oh! Oh! Such a delightful romancer! Such amazingly sweet lies! Oh, Dal-las, think you that a woman can be deceived, even though you keep your face straight?"

Then abruptly she was serious. Steady-eyed, she faced him.

"Dal-las, we do not love each other. No; I read your thoughts. 'This girl,' you say, 'has saved my life. Now, how can I repay her? Why, easily; I shall be the gentleman and marry her, be always a devoted husband. That is what she expects; that is what she desires. No gentleman could refuse her.'—Be still!

"What you did for me, that night in San Francisco, you feel that a woman should only accept. It does not put me in your debt, you think. So, when I saved your life in Caborca, you do not consider that as balancing of our account. Oh, you men! As if a woman is not a human being—as if a woman cannot receive and repay a favor!"

Abruptly she shrugged, and smiled affectionately at the dumbfounded Leigh.

"No, you do not love me. I do not love you. We are quits on the score of services rendered. I shall always think of you as of a brother; I think that you will remember me as a sister. But you will go back to Virginia, my Dal-las, to your mother and that poor man, your brother; to—Marjorie. *Si*, back to your own country."

"Good!" came a deep voice from the doorway. "Yellow Wolf will ride partway with you."

PAID IN PELTRY

IN THE year 1830, and during the decade immediately preceding and following that time, an uninitiated traveler in northern Arkansas might well have been startled at sight of a strange and, to him, unbelievable animal ambling along a country road. A few paces in front of the creature in question, he probably would have seen a small, dark man, astride a long-eared mule. Strapped to the man's belt, alongside his powder and bullet pouches, would have been a leather ink-bottle, and upon the rider's back, in a deer-skin knapsack, the protruding ends of a huge tax-roll would have been in evidence.

The small, dark man would doubtless have introduced himself, had he met a stranger, as Jason Stovall, County Tax Collector, had the traveler been minded to pause and exchange the courtesies of the times. The traveler would undoubtedly have been so minded; the queer animal at Jason's heels would have insured that. Furthermore, he would have propounded numerous curious questions relative to its character.

Apparently a quadruped partaking of the physical appearance of every wild animal native to the country had attached itself to Jason's entourage, and occupied itself in following him slowly wherever he went. There was, of course, a satisfying explanation, and it would have been forthcoming, had Jason been approached about it.

The curious animal was nothing more or less than a led-mule, piled high with, and completely covered by, the tax-fees the collector had gathered on his rounds. One needed a pair of very good eyes, indeed, to discern the mule beneath his huge cargo, which all but dragged along the ground on both sides of him.

Peltry, to be exact. The cured hides of deer, fox, coon, bobcat, mink, and other fur-bearing animals, passed as currency in those days, and the state officers accepted them without question, as a matter of course, in payment of all debts to the Commonwealth, including fines assessed by the courts. An offender might be fined "three bobcat, two mink, and four deer hides," as actually occurred in one instance. Tax collectors, on long journeys from the county seats, often required two, and sometimes three, mules, in order to carry the peltry offered in payment of taxes. Silver, gold, and paper money was so rare in northern Arkansas that children were often taken long distances that they might see, for the first time, the nation's standard medium of exchange.

A good coon-hide, in those days, was worth about twenty-five cents—but then, twenty-five cents, in "hard" money, would buy a tremendous amount of beans in 1830.—E. P. W.

THE JUNGLE CONVERT

By OSCAR SCHISGALL

Deep in the jungles of British Guiana, miles from the nearest outpost of civilization, Landark pits his white man's will against the savage determination of Swogo, the head-hunter

THROUGH the billowing blue smoke of his pipe, Landark, he whom the natives called the God-man of the whites, squinted across the table. His eyes were fixed upon me with intensity so piercing that I was compelled to frown, to cough, to reach uneasily for a match. There was something strange in those eyes, a constant flame which seemed to leap whenever a new thought occurred to him; or perhaps that impression was created by their position. They were the center of a shaggy, bearded head. Over them, masses of black hair waved in unkempt profusion; under them, a black beard, tangled and neglected, concealed the rest of the face so that you were conscious only of his eyes as you looked at him. Whatever the reason, I could not suppress a sense of nervousness while he peered through the undulating smoke.

In relief I finally saw him shift his scrutiny to Dr. Rashell, seated at my side. He pulled the long, curved pipe out of his beard, gazed down into its bowl of smouldering ashes; when he spoke, it was as if he were addressing the sweet-smelling tobacco.

"Afraid?" His deep tones held the word, repeated it. Then he shrugged. "No, I'm not afraid. Why should I be? What is there to fear? The natives? Bah! They are as friendly as white men. They know and like me. And, more, they are willing to listen to my sermons." He paused to press the rising ashes back into the bowl, and glanced up with a smile. "No," he finished, "I am not afraid. A missionary wouldn't progress very far if he were afraid."

Dr. Rashell rubbed a hand over his bald head. Unlike the huge, powerful Landark, he was a squat little man, plump and always perspiring. His pink cheeks actually glistened with moisture. Even now the cream colored suit he wore appeared wilted and stained, beaten by the tropic sun. As he answered, he looked at me quizzically, searching my features for corroboration.

"I don't know," he mumbled. "I suppose it is noble work and all that, this business of making good Christians of those black heathen. But *I* couldn't do it. No, gentlemen, not I. To live out in this scorching wilderness, a hermit, two hundred miles from white civilization, with no one to talk to but black savages—and all this, merely to change the religious beliefs of those blacks! As if it really mattered——"

Landark's beard parted in a smile. Deliberately he thrust the long pipe into his mouth.

"It does matter. You understand, don't

you, Somerville?" he said to me slyly, between puffs.

I nodded mechanically. Before his unswerving and idealistic determination to seclude himself from all the lures of civilization, I felt quite helpless. Inwardly, however, I was not at all certain that I did understand him.

In truth, no one quite understood him. I had never known a man in the whole British Guiana whose personality and behavior were more mystifying than those of Henry Stephen Landark, the god-man of the whites. Six years previously he had dedicated his life to converting the natives on the banks of the Essequibo to the worship of the white Deity. Why he had suddenly thrown himself into that work, no one knew—not even Dr. Rashell and I, his most intimate friends. He had simply reached the amazing decision, deserted his parish, and, before we had fully recovered from the shock of his announcement, he had brazenly pushed into the interior, back beyond even the frontier of civilization.

More than two hundred miles inland Landark built himself a hut. He constructed it alone, without help, hacking trees to carpentry. It was a crude thing, of logs and extremely small. On the banks of the river, it offered a lonely shelter hemmed in by the dense, ever menacing jungle growth. Crazily twisting branches of parasite-laden trees crawled over its roof, forming a canopy to intercept the blazing heat of the sun. Its single room was furnished with a table, a cot, and a few chairs; that was all.

For one who had all his life enjoyed comfort, it was a wretched home. But Landark had gloated with a sense of accomplishment when its erection was completed, and immediately he faced the more hazardous venture of instructing the natives in the white man's religion.

That they received him with friendship was obvious, but inexplicable; especially when he came boldly to flaunt the potency of their gods. Yet he had somehow succeeded in gaining their respect; rather, he had earned their reverence. They came to him, those little black men, squatted before the door of his hut, gaped, listened in awe to what he had to tell them. One of them, an arrogant dandy who had served as a guide in Georgetown long enough to assume the capacity of interpreter, aided Landark in his labors.

And so, for six years, the missionary had lived in the small cabin on the banks of the Essequibo. He was content; for him life was full and interesting and ever a contest.

Of course, the doctor and I had not permitted ourselves to forget our friend. Dutifully, every three months, we packed canoes with provisions, tobacco, books, and newspapers; we employed a few Carib guides and paddled up the river on a long pilgrimage to the jungle hermit. Usually we remained at the hut a week. But this trip——

ELL, this trip furnished an astounding discovery which left us quite unnerved. We were expecting to start our return journey in the morning.

The cause for our haste? It was Swogo the head-hunter. For Landark had taken Swogo into his home as cordially as he had received us! He was living with the black savage, living for months with a withered creature who already swung two hideous trophies of war from his dirty loin-cloth!

During the dispute between Landark and Dr. Rashell, I listened inattentively to their words; my own thoughts were fixed upon the revolting companion the missionary had chosen to share his solitude. To me the thing was not only incomprehensible, but repulsive. I glared about the barren room, hazy with smoke. Then, of a sudden, I sat very still. Conversation ended abruptly. His eyes wide, Dr. Rashell gaped toward the door, nudged me.

Swogo had entered. It was not the first time we had seen him since our arrival, but somehow each successive view of the savage augmented my horror. Involuntarily I stiffened, while Rashell's lips twisted in disgust.

Grinning, Swogo stared at us. He was an ugly creatu e, scarcely more than four feet tall. His body, in which every rib stood out distinctly, was naked, except for the loin-cloth Landark had induced him to wear. The skin was wrinkled, stained with splotches of mud from the Essequibo. And his hair seemed the ugliest thing about his person; it stood erect on his head, like knotted cords, dry, filled with dirt, and wild.

I actually shuddered, and I am certain that I heard a soft ejaculation from the doctor. Both of us were looking at the things which dangled from his waist, two balls no larger than oranges, and brown; but those balls hung on twisted hair, and they had slits which had once been eyes,

and projections which had been noses, and mouths. They were Swogo's greatest treasures, those dried heads, and he displayed them as proudly as civilized men wear medals.

Perhaps Landark noticed our discomfiture, for he uttered some guttural word which the head-hunter accepted as a command. Still grinning, so that his gleaming white teeth seemed to protrude from his mouth, he shuffled awkwardly out of the cabin.

Both Rashell and I drew deep breaths of relief. The doctor wiped streams of perspiration from his red forehead.

"Lord, Landark, where did you get that hideous devil?" he snapped irascibly, after a time.

Surprised by the tone of the question, the missionary slowly placed his pipe on the table and rested his hands on his knees.

"He isn't a hideous devil, Rashell—not if you really know him," he murmured. "Simply a misguided human creature with black skin——"

"Where did you get him?" repeated the doctor, rather curtly. He was scowling, annoyed by an insect buzzing about his bald head.

Landark leaned forward and spoke more confidingly. His deep voice sank to a monotonous drone, inaudible outside the hut. His bearded countenance was hard.

"Two months ago I found him," he said. "A tribe of head-hunters swept down upon the natives around here, but they were repulsed, driven back into the jungle. Only Swogo failed to escape. He was captured, after he had been terribly wounded. The natives were about to sacrifice him, burn him, when I interceded."

Landark paused to glance toward the door.

"The natives respect me and my wishes around here," he continued in tones even more subdued. "When I demanded Swogo's freedom, they objected for a while but finally gave him to my care. He was to be my slave. The natives were proud to offer me the gift of his body. So I brought him here to my hut and nursed him back to life. That was two months ago. Since then he has remained with me. He knows he cannot run away without passing through miles of hostile country. But more than that, I know he feels sincere gratitude toward me. He owes his life to me, and realizes it. The fellow is a veritable man Friday."

Landark straightened, pushed the pipe into his mouth. While he touched a match to its bowl, Rashell eyed me uneasily; but we said nothing. Dense billows of smoke rose from the missionary's mouth.

"For two months Swogo and I, living together like brothers, have been studying each other," he added, after a while. "He already understands a few words of English, while I can manage a few expressions in his strange language. It is extremely interesting, gentlemen."

There was silence, strained silence. Finally it was I who shattered it.

"Why, in Heaven's name, are you keeping him here, Landark?" I demanded in exasperation. "What good can come of it? What——"

"Ah!" interrupted the missionary, suddenly pointing a long finger at me. His eyes were sparkling. "You have struck it, Somerville! I keep him here—in Heaven's name!"

My mystification must have been evident, for Landark emitted a soft laugh which shook his whole, huge body.

"I'm trying to perform a very difficult trick with that little fellow," he explained. "I am trying to make a Christian of him!"

Dr. Rashell almost rose to his feet, but the effort in that heat was too strenuous. Instead, he muttered something indistinguishable, turned toward me appealingly, then sank back in limp resignation.

"To teach that savage Christianity!" he wailed. "Oh, Lord! And with two heads dangling from that devil's waist!"

"I think this is the finest work I have ever attempted," came the earnest retort. "Don't you see my plan? I shall make that man a Christian, if I have to struggle for years to do it. And when I succeed I shall send him back to his people. Now do you understand? My purpose is to send a Christian into the tribes of the savages, a Christian to whom they will listen, one whom they will understand! What greater work can a missionary do?"

"Man," Rashell declared hotly, "that idea is insane. You can't teach that black devil anything. He has no ability to understand reason. He's a head-hunter, that's all; a creature of passion, not one of brains. How can you make such a thing comprehend your teachings? How can you ever hope to——"

"It may take time," tolerantly muttered Landark, sucking on his pipe, "but I shall certainly make Swogo a good Christian instead of a worshipper of Zuruguru."

"Who?" I asked, starting forward.

"Zuruguru. That's what he calls his god of gods."

WRY grimace appeared on Rashell's countenance, and I believe that I imitated him. After that we were silent for many minutes, each of us absorbed in contemplating the missionary's ambition. We smoked and smacked ourselves to catch the troublesome insects and breathed laboriously in the terrific heat. From somewhere up the river came the squawk and splash of a flamingo, and an instant later we heard the unmistakable call of an ibis.

Finally Rashell sighed. Defeated in his attempt to sway Landark with one type of logic, he sought another.

"You know," he declared, "that it is dreadfully unhealthy to live with that filthy black devil."

"I make him bathe in the river frequently, when no crocodiles are around," retorted Landark.

He seemed poised, like a swordsman, ready to receive and to parry every thrust. His eyes danced with the enjoyment he found in the encounter.

"It's enough to drive a man insane," the doctor persisted. "Living with that—that—" He stopped to shake his head. "I mean it, Landark. Watching his habits, listening to his snarling language which you can't understand; all that can blast your mind."

"A distant possibility," agreed the missionary. "But I flatter myself sufficiently to believe that my mentality is stronger than his. He will succumb to my teachings before I lose my head because of him. Don't let that worry you, Rashell."

Palpably, the doctor was baffled. He could think of no other objection with which to attack Landark's determination. He frowned, began beating a fist upon his knee.

There was no confidence in my voice as I came to his assistance.

"But, Landark, aren't you afraid?" I asked, somewhat timidly. "A savage with you—sleeping in the same house—constantly at your side. He's a head-hunter. Suppose the old instinct asserted itself. How do you know that he won't——"

The missionary waved his hand. Evidently he was amused by my uneasiness.

"Nonsense, Somerville," he said easily. "I trust him implicitly. I saved his life. He might die for me, but he would never hurt me." He rose slowly, looked down at us over the table. "No, gentlemen, you cannot persuade me to send him away. I have set a task for myself, and I expect to accomplish it. Now, Somerville, if you will get that chess board you brought, I think I'll enjoy a game before supper. Eh?"

There the discussion ended, with the missionary victorious. We played, he and I, while Rashell watched. There was silence, peace; but always that ugly little Swogo hovered about the door like an ever-present menace. His constant grin sent shudders through me.

Not until evening did we perceive the first manifestation of what the missionary's religious struggle with the savage would be; it happened in a most startling manner when Landark began his prayers. As long as I had known him he had dutifully performed his vespertinal rites. Seemingly the jungle had not broken his habits. That Rashell and I were present meant little to him; his duties to Heaven were of greater importance. Kneeling beside his cot, he clasped his hands and began his prayer.

"O Lord——"

He had spoken scarcely a dozen words when we heard Swogo's harsh voice raised in a penetrating shriek. Simultaneously Rashell and I sprang to the door and stared out; there we saw the small black man in a clearing beside the river. His shriveled body was silhouetted against the glitter of the moon on the water. His arms were lifted high above him, and in each hand he grasped one of the dried heads. From his throat rasped a hoarse call.

"Zuruguru! Zuruguru!"

He continued, with fervor almost frantic, to scream the name, to wave the trophies he had won, sometimes to leap in the suggestion of a dance. When finally he stopped and stared at us, we noticed that Landark was leaning against the door. The big man was smiling strangely, his fingers twisting in his beard.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"His prayer," replied the missionary. "Swogo has a peculiar pride. He refuses to be outdone by me. Whenever he hears me pray to my God, he immediately offers prayers to his own. He is very devout. When finally converted, he will make a good Christian. Only his pride——"

We looked at Swogo, standing at the edge of the river. He grinned back, as if he were fully cognizant of what we had been whispering to each other. Then, unexpectedly, he extended his trophies to us.

"Zuruguru!" he called, in a soft, mocking drone.

THREE months after that unpleasant visit Dr. Rashell and I once more started up the Essequibo. We traveled in two canoes, and each little craft had two Carib guides to propel it on its difficult course. They were surly, half clad fellows, those Indians, whose brown skins were soaked with perspiration after the first few minutes of the trip. But though they labored energetically; they never protested. Experience had numbed their tongues; they knew that Rashell and I paid generously.

Throughout most of the journey the Caribs managed to keep the canoes abreast of each other, so that the doctor, smoking, could converse with me, while I had the same ease in communicating with him. Yet we were silent most of the time. Perhaps it was the sun which discouraged us; it blazed down fiercely on the river. Whenever possible, the Caribs steered the canoes in the shade of the branches which bent over the banks on either side of the water. The shade offered relief. Through the dense jungle growth our gazes could never penetrate for more than a few feet. The parasitic plants joining the trees formed a green wall which effectually made a mystery of everything inland.

I could feel perspiration running in rivulets on my chest and back; my light, loose clothes clung to me. Had it not been for the shade of my helmet, I should not have been able to keep my eyes open. Rashell, too, was suffering from the heat, but he smoked placidly, seldom glancing toward my canoe.

Staring at the shining, wet back of the Carib before me, I sank into my own thoughts. Incessantly monkeys chattered in the trees about us—the only sound in that wilderness, save the occasional squawk and awkward, splashing flight of a startled flamingo.

The natural beauties which always attracted the notice of Rashell, and usually elicited admiring exclamations from me, somehow exercised little effect upon us. Even when the doctor saw an egrette airing its brilliant plumes on a low, heavily laden branch, he merely grunted and pointed to it. Customarily, we would have stopped our progress to stare at the bird.

Later we slipped past a quiet cove in which floated a carpet of immense water flowers whose leaves measured more than five feet in diameter, whose petals formed a circle three feet wide. Dr. Rashell looked at them and said nothing, while I—a scientist to whom such things meant more than beauty alone—did not even order my Caribs to approach the flowers.

The thing that was weighing upon us was, of course, the prospect of visiting Landark—and Swogo. How well the missionary had accomplished his task of converting the black man to Christianity, we had no means of knowing. Within a few days, however, we should see; and, frankly, I think we were vaguely afraid of what developments would greet us.

Our fears proved to be more than fears; they were presentiments.

When, after exhausting days of travel, we reached a spot a mile from Landark's cabin, our guides paddled the canoes to the shore. In spite of our protests, the Caribs shook their heads and stepped out to the banks of the river. They refused to go farther, and their reason was plausible.

On our last visit to the missionary these natives had seen the head-hunter, Swogo, idling about the hut. Near him they would not go in response to any bribe, threat, or promise. They unloaded their share of our provisions, prepared to camp, and said they would await the return of the white men.

Rashell cursed and I expostulated, but there was no choice for us. We were compelled to grasp paddles and continue the journey alone for the last mile. Not until then did I fully realize what labor it was to guide a craft up the river in that blazing sun.

From the instant we saw Landark step out of his cabin to welcome us we knew something had happened to him, changed him. He had heard the splash of our paddles and awaited us on the bank of the river. His black beard had grown and become more tangled. His loose clothes were almost tattered, the trousers vanishing in mud-covered boots. Though he waved his hand cheerily, we could discern the harassed manner of his gesture.

Forcefully he gripped our hands when we leaped ashore; in truth, he hugged us with his powerful arms, and chattered merrily, profusely. Yet, despite his joviality, it was easy to see the haggard expression which had crept into his eyes. And his hair was touched with gray.

Neither the doctor nor I ventured any comment upon his appearance while he

conducted us into the hut. Gratefully we sank upon the chairs about the table, threw off our helmets, and sighed as the perspiration dripped from our bodies. Seated opposite us, Landark prattled on of unimportant things.

At moments we detected a queer tremor in his deep tones; and his eyes flamed strangely, as though they were ever ready to leap into hysterical laughter. Constantly his fingers drummed upon the table, or clutched its edge. He was restless; sometimes, when he paused in his rapid speech, a frightened gleam flickered in those expressive eyes. It vanished quickly, leaving an embarrassed nervousness in its wake.

The doctor, I could see, was distressed. As long as he found it possible, he was silent. But at last he could no longer control himself.

"Landark, what's wrong with you?" he exclaimed irrelevantly, in the midst of the missionary's talk. "What's happened?"

The big man stopped abruptly, sharply drew his breath. For an instant he frowned, his fingers gripping the table. Then slowly he smiled, shrugged.

"Nothing," he replied. "I'm all right."

"Where is that Swogo?" demanded Rashell.

"Swogo? Somewhere around. Up the river, I suppose, searching for a crocodile at which to throw stones. He'll be back soon."

"Living with that disgusting devil is ruining your health, Landark!" asserted the physician. "You're nervous, unstrung. The strain is breaking your strength. Oh, don't deny it, man! I can see—I can see!"

The missionary dropped the impulse to retort. Scowling, he began filling his long pipe. Into his beard he mumbled a few sounds which we could not distinguish.

"Have you made any progress in—in the conversion?" I interposed hastily.

Landark stared up straight into my eyes. "I think so," he said, after a pause.

"You think so? Aren't you certain?"

Thoughtfully frowning, he resumed filling the pipe.

"Well, I don't know," he answered, presently. "It puzzles me. For hours I sit telling him the truth of the white man's religion. I reason with him, argue. He understands enough English to comprehend what I say. He squats on the floor and nods wisely. And, when I finish, he grasps my wrist, looks at me seriously, and talks for hours about—Zuruguru."

LANDARK stopped; with fingers which were visibly unsteady he touched a match to his pipe. The clouds of smoke he blew seemed to soothe and strengthen him.

"He jabbers on in crazy English about the powers of his god," he went on more firmly. "Why, I know as much about Zuruguru as any savage! It—it's his method of retaliation, you see. He is proud of his paganism. He knows the beauties of Christianity, but opposes to them the advantages of worshipping Zuruguru."

"Strange," I murmured.

Dr. Rashell, in deep concern, scratched his chin and wiped the dampness from his round, ruddy face.

"It would be funny if he converted you, wouldn't it, Landark?"

The missionary smiled vaguely as he puffed. It was a smile so enigmatic that it frightened me.

"Does he still—pray?" I asked, leaning toward him.

"Pray!" Landark sat erect, stiff, menacing. He snatched the pipe from his lips and glared across the table at us. "That," he snapped harshly, "is what hurts me, stabs me! Every time I lift my voice in prayer to the Lord, I hear that heathen shriek to his god! It is the inevitable accompaniment. He refuses to be outdone! In every other thing he obeys me, but in that——" The big man gulped, clenched his fist. "His pride won't let him surrender. He knows the precepts of Christianity; of that I'm sure. But he won't allow me to conquer him. Why—why—it has reached that stage where I don't consider my prayer complete unless I hear that yell to Zuruguru outside!"

Landark rose. His hands clasped behind his back, the pipe thrust into his beard, he strode ponderously about the hut. He was scowling, and great masses of smoke belched from him, trailed him.

For a long time we were silent, the doctor and I staring at each other in vague fear. At last Rashell spoke.

"Landark," he said, "this—this contest—that's what it is, a contest—is wrecking your nerves. You must give it up. It is hopeless, and dangerous."

The missionary whirled around. He glowered, his keen eyes brilliant with leaping flames. Two strides brought him to the table, and he smashed his fist down on

the boards so powerfully that the whole hut seemed to quiver.

"Give it up!" he cried hoarsely. "Give it up! Man, don't you understand what is happening? This thing has become more than a matter of converting a pagan. I feel as if—as if the entire wisdom and power and beauty of Christianity are being matched against the strength of paganism! I feel as if I represent the civilized world, and Swogo the savage world. It is a battle of the two worlds. For me to give it up would be to acknowledge the inferiority of Christianity. Don't you understand that? In me has been vested the honor of our beliefs. I am fighting a battle, and I *must* win!"

Abashed by his vehemence, he stopped and eyed us uncertainly, as though he feared we might laugh. Then he began smoking; again he paced about the hut.

Against his dogged determination there was nothing which Rashell or I could say. We sat in silence until conversation somehow drifted to less dramatic topics. Landark became calmer; he resumed his seat and questioned us concerning the activities of the civilized races. Lightly, but with evident strain falsifying that lightness, we related the news of the world.

Late in the afternoon Swogo returned. He stood in the door, grinning to express his recognition. There was no change in him: his ribs still protruded in the black skin; his hair still stood on his head like stiff cords; his trophies still dangled from his waist. But he did not intrude. It was evening before we actually heard him speak—and then we heard him as we had heard him once before.

As soon as Landark began uttering his prayers, that harsh, shrieking voice rose from the banks of the river.

"Zuruguru! Zuruguru!"

When we looked out, he stood there, his hideous dried heads lifted in offering to the sky. The river glittered under a full moon. From the jungle issued a piercing scream of some bird.

"O Lord—" came Landark's voice from the hut behind us.

THE ultimate outcome of the religious war we did not learn until a month later. In Georgetown, neither Rashell nor I could wait the customary length of time before contemplating a journey inland. We were too deeply concerned with thoughts of the jungle hermit to idle placidly until three months had passed.

Extremely nervous, the doctor visited me one morning with a suggestion that we rush inland. He was afraid, he declared, to leave Landark out there alone with the grinning, stubborn head-hunter. At our last visit, the strain of conflict seemed to have battered down much of the missionary's strength. To the physician's desire I had no objections; indeed, for several days I had been troubled with the same urge to return to the wilderness hut.

So, again employing our Caribs, we started an unscheduled voyage up the Essequibo. We traveled with amazing rapidity, for Rashell had been shrewd enough to promise our guides generous remuneration if the trip were made quickly. They sweated, those brown-skinned Caribs, and bent their strong, gleaming backs to the paddles as we slid swiftly through the blazing heat. We two white men were too nervous to be merciful; we permitted the Caribs to labor frantically, even urged them on to greater speed.

A mile below Landark's cabin our canoes were guided to the bank; as they had done on our previous journey, the Caribs refused to advance any farther toward the dreaded Swogo. Wasting little time in what we realized must be futile argument, Rashell and I pushed on, scarcely addressing a word to each other. One question hung before us: how would be find Landark?

Abruptly we came in sight of the hut. It stood desolate, small, dismal; branches sprawled over its roof; trees hemmed it in its clearing. There was not a sign of activity.

"Funny," muttered Rashell. "He usually rushes out to greet us."

"Probably he hasn't heard us yet," I ventured, though my uneasiness belied my optimism.

The doctor, his canoe gliding abreast of mine, glanced at me. Then he ceased paddling long enough to place his hands about his mouth while he yelled the missionary's name.

He received a startling reply. Out of the hut came a harsh, throaty call. Not Landark dashed out to welcome us, but Swogo.

The little black man leaped out of the door, scrambled down to the bank, and pulled our canoes to the land. He was panting, quivering; yet he seemed wildly glad that we had come. His jabbering was

for a while unintelligible; guttural sounds issued from his throat, savage sounds. He gesticulated with his arms and actually pranced, not unlike a dog that mutely strives to make its master comprehend a message.

Then, suddenly, out of his bewildering jargon, one word of English became comprehensible.

"Sick—sick—" he repeated.

We understood at once. Impulsively Rashell and I rushed toward the hut, into the door way. Our fears were realized.

Landark lay on his cot. One arm hung to the floor; the other lay stretched above his head. From his hairy chest the shirt had been ripped away, and his shaggy beard framed a fever-flushed countenance.

But the most astouning thing in his appearance was the fire in his rounded eyes. It was a strange fire—feverish, insane. He looked at us when we entered, but there was no recognition in his gaze. Instead, he began to prattle incoherently, jerkily.

Dr. Rashell spat an oath as he hurled his helmet to a chair. Discarding his amazement for an expression of professional sternness, he bent over the cot. Landark, looking up, did not see him; he continued to mutter.

After a moment Rashell turned to me, his forehead furrowed.

"Somerville," he said softly, "we've got to take him back to Georgetown immediately."

"What is it?" I asked, in a whisper.

"The fever. He has succumbed to it. He—he's delirious."

"Danger?" I murmured timorously.

"Very great danger. Unless we get him out of here at once, he may die."

I was about to reply, but an exclamation behind me caused me to stare. Swogo stood in the hut, his eyes filled with fear and anguish. The little body seemed more shriveled than ever, its ribs forming ridges across the abdomen. He was swaying from side to side, the horrible heads swinging from his waist. That he had understood part of our conversation, was obvious.

"Die!" he repeated hoarsely.

Then, dazed, he began pacing about the cabin, mumbling. His fingers sought the dried heads, gripped them; he went to the cot and stared down at the bearded face and uttered some guttural words. For a while he appeared on the verge of a drastic deed; and he did it.

Rashell and I gaped in amazement. The doctor even gripped my arm and pointed to the black savage, as if I myself had not already seen the phenomenon.

Swogo, the pagan; Swogo, the head-hunter; Swogo, the worshipper of Zuruguru—Swogo fell to his knees, clasped his hands, and prayed fervently to the white man's God!

It was a weird prayer, in scarcely recognizable English, but a few of the words came to us.

"Lord—he no die—Lord—please—he no die!"

Rashell's grip on my wrist tightened painfully.

"In Heaven's name, Somerville, he has done it!" the physician whispered into my ear. "Landark has done it. He's won!"

To me the truth evinced itself vaguely. It was incredible, this sight of the black head-hunter calling upon the white man's God. Yet I believe I understood: Swogo's affection for Landark had impelled him to this desperate resource. Even his pride sank to insignificance before his desire to have the missionary live. He was begging the white God to preserve the life of a white man.

A sense of exultant satisfaction thrilled me. Landark had won!

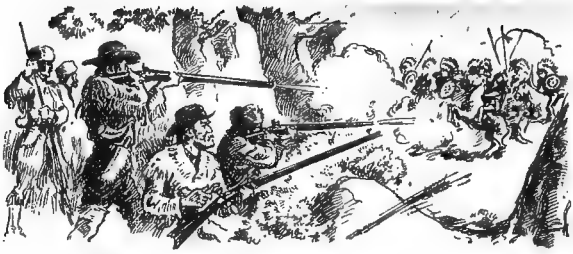
At that moment the big man suddenly pushed himself up on his elbow and glared at Swogo kneeling beside him. His flaming eyes snapped, blinked, as he listened to the strange prayer. He looked at us and looked again at the black man. For an instant he listened.

Then, in his delirium, Landark leaped off the cot. He staggered a moment, steadied himself against the wall. A deep breath swelled his huge, hair-covered chest. Then he lunged toward Swogo.

Rashell and I stood speechless, as though paralyzed. We saw the powerful Christian missionary, insane with fever, snatch the two human heads from Swogo's waist, saw him raise the hideous things high into the air. In a rasping, piercing voice, he screamed madly——

"Zuruguru! Zuruguru!"

Another Schisgall Story
THE FEAST OF THE SEVEN WOMEN
NEXT MONTH



PIONEERS, O PIONEERS!

By MICHAEL WILLIAMS
Author of "Remember the Alamo!"

Through the Western wilderness, over mountains and deserts, to Spanish California and the Pacific, penetrated the Kentucky frontiersmen of Pattie's party, first Americans to make the overland trip—but for every hard-won mile savage Indians and swarming grizzlies exacted a terrific toll

CLEARLY, though faintly, the sound broke the night as softly as a bubble bursting on the surface of a still mountain pool. It brought Jim Pattie, hovering on the edge of sleep, back to attention like the clang of a bell. Throwing back the bearskin in which he lay wrapped upon the flat roof of the adobe house, he swiftly stepped to the low parapet, leaning across it with straining ears. Then he started back, even more swiftly than he had advanced. The slight confusion of mind produced by the relaxing shadow of sleep had passed away, and he remembered what the captain had so often said as the Kentuckians advanced farther and farther across the frontier, from Missouri into the unknown deserts and mountains of New Mexico: "Don't ever get away from your weapons, even in your sleep."

Their trail from the Council Bluffs to Santa Fe was marked by the graves of those for whom the advice had been useless; but those who had come through safely knew how sound it was; especially now when they had penetrated so deeply among the suspicious and hostile Mexicans. So Jim Pattie picked up his rifle and loosened his bowie knife in his belt, before he returned to the parapet, just as the strange sound began again, nearer and louder.

It was music, he now recognized, but music such as he had never heard in his remote home in the pine forests of the Gasconade River, or in St. Louis, that city which had seemed so mighty to his unaccustomed eyes when he had passed through it on his way to join Pratte's expedition. Singing and fiddling he knew, but not the sharp, sweet, piercing twang of guitars and mandolins accompanying the love chant of young men, in Spanish, under a flood of moonlight, in the plaza of a city fantastic as a dream with its stone churches and adobe mansions.

The young backwoodsman knew just enough Spanish to recognize it as a song of love. The minstrels were grouped under the jutting balcony across the plaza, two sides of which were draped in heavy, velvety shadow, the other sides shining as with molten silver under the moon that flooded with marvelous brilliance a purple sky without a fleck of cloud. Swiftly they sang, but briefly, and then passed on to another place, and sang again, as if they were on a pilgrimage of many serenades, station by station. Far away, at last, the voices died out, yet still the young American hung over the parapet, fatigue forgotten, his need for sleep defeated.

Behind him, on the roof, were many dim forms, rolled in blankets, for the air of Santa Fe was keenly sharp by night. Two or three roused, and cursed sleepily at being disturbed. For these elder adventurers, this serenading was not romance; it was a nuisance. As the singing voices dwindled, the grumblers rolled back into their shelters again, and back to sleep. They were veterans of the frontier, and, though none had ever before ventured to the cities of New Mexico, nevertheless, they took all the new things they met with more assurance; they accepted all unknown events with much more calmness than Jim Pattie could do.

Upon him lay the magic spell of an adventure which was to last for six years from that night, and to cram into those years the romance of many lifetimes; which was to give his name a place in the history of the United States high among those humble pioneers of its great destiny —the wandering Kentucky hunters and traders who ever pushed farther and farther westward in advance of civilization.

Romance is a mood that cannot be maintained indefinitely in this mortal life of ours; Jim Pattie found himself yawning heavily again as his sleepiness returned, and he went back to his couch. It was midnight or later. With dawn they would be roused by that stern, silent, though kindly leader of the pioneering party, his father, the great frontiersman, Sylvester Pattie. But Jim Pattie did not get back to sleep.

OUT of the silent night, banishing the memory of the serenade, there violently swirled a harsh riot of alarming noises. A bugle blast dominated the tumult. The bugle in turn was drowned by a shrill clamor of fifes and drums, and of women's frightened screams. Out of the side streets, swarming into the patio, came men, women and children, half dressed, or less. From one large squat building, the barracks, soldiers came running. A few lanterns tossed redly here and there. Then a hasty bonfire of brushwood and logs was kindled.

The Kentuckians were now all awake. In the lower rooms of the house, and of the house next door, where the hundred men of the party were quartered, lights were kindled and rifles were made ready. Some ran to the horses and mules, corraled near by. To them came rushing a mob of people from the plaza. The Americans cocked their guns. But the moonlight showed more women than men, and they held their fire, their first belief that they were to be rushed and massacred by the Mexicans being dispeled by the frightened exclamations of the fugitives. They were coming to the American riflemen for protection instead of to attack them.

"The Comanches!" screamed the women, rushing into the houses with their children. "The Comanches are in the city, slaughtering us all!"

Sylvester Pattie and the other leaders drew up their forces in readiness. They gave protected positions to the frenzied women. The Mexican men, who also sought to enter, they drove back with curses, bidding them to get their arms and play their part as fighting men, if they could muster spunk enough. The Kentuckians awaited the Indians, wondering when the Mexicans in the plaza would begin to fire, but no shots were heard. Finally the Americans came to the conclusion that the raiding Comanches were skulking around, dealing out death in the darkness with their arrows.

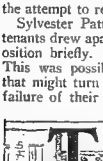
The dawn came, and in the first wan light the Kentuckians could see a body of some four hundred armed men standing by their horses. From this group a few men detached themselves as the light grew stronger, and advanced toward the Americans.

"The Governor!" exclaimed Sylvester Pattie, and with Pratte, the financial backer of the expedition of which Pattie was the commander, and one or two of the older traders, he stepped forward to meet the Mexican official. The other Americans silently watched and listened to the parley. Several knew enough Spanish to follow the conversation, and these communicated what they learned to the others.

A party of horsemen had galloped into Santa Fe in the night from the Rio Pecus, some eighty miles away, where a number of noblemen and officials had country houses and large farms. A war party of the Comanches had raided some of the mansions, killing men, women, and children, and carrying six women away with them on their retreat. Among the prisoners was the daughter of the former governor, who had been displaced because he was a Spaniard when the revolt against Spain broke out, but who was still one of the most important men in New Mexico. Through the remainder of the night, the

governor had been mustering and mounting a party of soldiers and planters to pursue the Indians. He now had come to the Americans to ask them to take part in the attempt to recapture the women.

Sylvester Pattie, Pratte, and their lieutenants drew apart and discussed the proposition briefly. They were of one mind. This was possibly the great opportunity that might turn what threatened to be the failure of their expedition into success.



THEY had reached Santa Fe only the day before, late in November, 1826, a day that was to become memorable in the annals of the American frontier, and of the history of the vast and rapid southwestern expansion of the United States.

Ever since the return of Lewis and Clark in 1806, from the first successful journey from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, fur-trading and hunting among the Indians of the Northwest had been busily proceeding. But the profitable opportunities for Southwestern trading and trapping and exploration had been neglected. In the Northwest, the only perils to be faced were the Indians, and the usual hazards of forest wanderings; in the Southwest there were not only these dangers, but also the additional complication of the Spanish, and later the Mexican, control of New Mexico.

Between the outposts of the American frontier, in Missouri, and the regions held by the Mexicans, lay, for the most part, level and easily traversed plains, watered by the numerous upper branches of the great western affluents of the Mississippi. The Mexican towns and pueblos and missions in New Mexico, "isolated islands of a sluggish civilization," derived nearly all of their imports by way of the Gulf of Mexico and Vera Cruz. The goods came packed on mules, by difficult and highly dangerous land routes over mountain and desert, through hostile Indian country, more than fifteen hundred miles. Crushing taxes made the cost of these goods excessively high.

The common commercial interests of the Americans and the Mexicans lay in friendly trade relations. Whenever traders from the American frontier succeeded in reaching the Mexicans, the latter were ready, even anxious, to buy and to sell; but over the people were the government officials, who looked upon the hardy, acquisitive Americans with jealousy and suspicion and adopted a policy of repelling the American advance wherever possible. Still the pioneers pushed on. The frontier advanced behind them.

Zebulon Pike was among the first of the American adventurers to penetrate not only New Mexico but Mexico itself, in 1807. His experiences in the filthy jails of Chihuahua and Sante Fe were sufficiently bitter and depressing to dash the hopes of other would-be traders for many years. Then a party outfitting in St. Louis tried its fortunes. It completely disappeared, swallowed up behind the silence of the deserts for nine years, after which some of the members were released from prison.

About the same time the revolutionary disturbances in Mexico were boiling up along the border, to the further discouragement of the traders, so that it was not until after 1820 that the real history of the famous Sante Fe trail began. Among the first of the American advances, and one of the most important, was the Pratte expedition, commanded by Sylvester Pattie, the father of James Ohio Pattie, the romantic youth who heard the drums beat at midnight in Santa Fe.

SYLVESTER PATTIE was a Kentuckian whose father had gone from Virginia into the remote backwoods with other emigrant families in 1781, after having served in the Revolutionary War. Sylvester Pattie, like his father, pushed on westward again just as soon as that part of Kentucky in which he lived became settled and peaceful. In the very midst of the War of 1812, when the Indians were raiding again from the remote frontiers of Illinois and Missouri, Pattie moved his young family into Missouri, where he distinguished himself as a leader of the backwoodsmen in their constant struggles against the redskins.

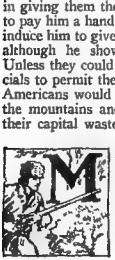
After the war, he went still farther west, erecting the first lumber mills on the Gasconade River. He lived there for many years, until the death of his wife destroyed his domestic happiness and sent him forth once more on wanderings from which he never returned but which gave him a place in history as one of the very first Americans to cross the continent and reach Southern California, thus opening the way for the ultimate conquest of the West.

To his remote log house on the Gasconade, there had come rumors of trapping and trading expeditions up the Missouri and to the interior of New Mexico. Selling his property, he invested the proceeds in merchandise and trapping equipment, and with his son, James Ohio Pattie, and two companions, he took the trail early in 1824. Prevented from ascending the Missouri to trade with the Indians because of a lack of the necessary license, Pattie joined a larger party assembled under the leadership of Pratte on the Platte River. This expedition was bound for New Mexico.

Because of the great reputation of Sylvester Pattie as an Indian-fighter and experienced backwoodsman, he was appointed commander of the one hundred and sixteen men, who, with three hundred mules and horses, began their memorable journey. From this epic exploration, so far as is known, only one man ever returned—this being young James Pattie.

They reached Santa Fe some four months after leaving the Platte. Already their number had been reduced through battles with the Indians and the night attacks of the grizzly bears, which roamed the country in incredible numbers, and often boldly attacked them.

On the morning of their arrival in Santa Fe, Pattie and Pratte waited upon the governor for permission to trap beaver and to trade. It seemed to the disgusted Americans that these negotiations would come to nothing. The governor said there was nothing in the law that would justify him in giving them the license. Even an offer to pay him a handsome commission did not induce him to give the required permission, although he showed signs of wavering. Unless they could induce the Mexican officials to permit them to trade and hunt, the Americans would have to turn back across the mountains and plains, their time and their capital wasted.



MATTERS were in this critical condition when Pattie and his party joined the Mexicans in pursuit of the Comanches. If they should succeed in helping the Mexicans to avenge the murder of their own people, they might, they believed, gain the permission which they returned to conduct their own affairs.

The whole of the first day was spent in traveling rapidly through the foothills and across the plains, east of Santa Fe, to the little town of San Juan. On the next day their scouts found the course the Indians had marked in their retreat, and the pursuers pressed on, through the day and through the night, as they found the fires of the Indians still smoking.

Early next morning the trail was still fresher and they increased their speed, and at noon came in sight of a large body of mounted Indians driving a herd of sheep and cattle, advancing toward a low gap in the mountains. The Americans and the Mexicans halted and held a council of war. The commander of the Mexicans recognized in Sylvester Pattie an experience and a capacity which made him propose that the Kentuckian should command the entire party. On his own part he promised explicit obedience.

Sylvester Pattie at once took charge. The Mexicans were directed to keep moving forward in the rear of the Indians, who had not yet noticed the approach of the white men. The Americans struck off rapidly on a circuitous route, screened from sight by low hills that lay between them and the Indians, hoping to gain unobserved a hollow in the hills in advance of the raiders, where they might remain concealed until the Comanches approached within gunshot. Pattie's main object was to surprise them and not give them time to kill their captives, should there be any of the white women still alive. At the first sound of the firing, the Mexicans in the rear were to close in and not permit the Comanches to return through the mountain gap to the open plain below.

The Americans reached the hollow, which was thickly wooded, and placed themselves in a half circle extending from one side of the glen to the other, their horses being tied securely and sheltered behind trees. Firing was to begin on the right flank and extend to the left, thus maintaining a running fire and giving those on the right time to reload. Picked marksmen were to bring down the Indians surrounding the prisoners, should any prisoners be discovered.

Jim Pattie was in the very center of the line. More than an hour they waited behind their screens of rocks and trees before the Comanches made their appearance. The Americans then understood the slowness of the approach. First came women on foot, driving the sheep and cattle, the mounted Indians behind. As the women drew near, a low murmur of pity and

rage ran through the Americans when they discovered that the women were the white prisoners and that scarcely any clothing was left upon them. The Americans permitted the Indians to approach within thirty or forty yards before the order to fire was given.

In spite of the best efforts of the frontiersmen to bring down the Indians nearest to the captives, three of the latter were at once pierced by the spears of the savages when the shooting began. With a cry of, "Save the women!" Jim Pattie and a companion sprang forward to rescue the two remaining white women. His companion was instantly slain by an arrow. An Indian had raised his spear to thrust it through one of the women, when a shot from Pattie's rifle killed him and the two captives ran to the young Kentuckian. Pattie and his companions threw their buckskin hunting jackets around the two young women, and they were hurried to a sheltered place.

Meanwhile, the Indians, after first making a stout resistance, had broken ranks and were retreating. On foot, the Americans pursued, keeping up a brisk and deadly fire and fully expecting the Mexicans to check the retreat where the mountain gap opened into the plain. But the Mexicans, after one desultory volley, broke and fled. The Indians, numbering between five and six hundred, again rallied and closed in upon the Americans, who were obliged to retreat and shelter themselves behind trees and rocks.

Every shot must tell. Their ammunition was scanty, only enough having been taken at Santa Fe to supply their immediate requirements. By only presenting a feeble show of resistance at first, they succeeded in enticing the Comanches to make a rush into the woods. There a fusillade of bullets so punished them that they again retreated, this time finally.

When the Americans came out upon the plain the Mexicans rejoined them, having watched the battle from a safe distance. Ten of the Americans had been slain, and several others were sorely wounded. The Mexican officer offered no apology, but insolently demanded that the two women should be delivered up to him. Deeply incensed by the arrogant tone of the request, Captain Pattie refused, but said that if the rescued women preferred to accompany the Mexican soldiers, rather than to remain under the protection of the Americans, he had nothing to say.

The point was speedily decided, the two young Mexican women declaring that nothing would induce them to leave the protection of the men who had saved them. The younger of the women, Jacova, proved to be the daughter of the former Spanish Governor of New Mexico.

The angered Mexicans set off on their return to Santa Fe. Before the Americans could return, there was the sad task of burying their fallen comrades. While this was being done by some, others hurriedly constructed a breastwork of timber that they might be prepared for the Indians in case they should return. By sunset the work was finished, and the evening campfire was lighted.

"The Governor's daughter," Jim Pattie narrates briefly in his journal of the expedition, "now inquired for the individual who first met her in her flight from the Indians, and so humanely and bravely conducted her out of danger and provided for her comfort. I cannot describe the gratitude and loveliness that appeared in her countenance as she looked at me when I was pointed out to her. Not attaching any merit to the act I had performed, and considering it merely as a duty, I did not know how to meet her acknowledgments, and was embarrassed."

EARLY the next day, without further trouble from the Indians, the return journey to Santa Fe was begun. By noon the second day they reached the settlement at the Rio Picos. Just outside the town they met Jacova's father, accompanied by a great number of Mexicans.

"The old man was transported almost to frenzy, when he saw his daughter," writes Pattie. "We remained here for the day. On the morning of the eighteenth we all set off together, the old governor insisting that my father and myself must ride in the carriage with him; but we excused ourselves and rode by the side of it with the interpreter."

The next day they arrived at Santa Fe. Despite the bad temper of the Mexican officer who had accompanied the expedition, he had truthfully reported the facts. The Americans were received with a salute from the troops and by the acclamations of the people. As a result of this affair the Americans received their license to trap and trade. Thereupon, the party was divided into a number of small groups, dif-

ferent routes were assigned, and the trapping began.

Pattie and his father, with five other Americans, set off to explore and trap on the Gila River, stopping on their way to visit Jacova, the rescued girl, and her father, in their large and magnificent mansion, in the midst of vineyards and gardens. Here they remained several days, being most hospitably entertained. When they started on their way again each man had a new horse, and plenty of flour and dried meat, gifts of Jacova's father.

For several months the little party wandered among the unknown mountains and plains, trapping beavers, caching the fur, and fighting Indians almost daily. Sometimes they discovered themselves being tracked in the woods, and only their skill of woodcraft and their deadly accuracy as riflemen carried them safely through ambuscade or open attack. Even so, a band of Indians raided their camp and carried off most of their horses at a time when the hunters were busily setting beaver traps.

They were then in the midst of a barren country, where game was so scarce that only the meat of the beavers they trapped in the scattered mountain streams and ponds kept them supplied with food. All other provisions had disappeared with the stolen horses. As they went farther on, even the beavers disappeared. Their moccassins were worn out, and the last stages of the march were marked with the blood of their lacerated feet.

Even when the plain was reached, they found no water for some time, and drank the warm blood of an antelope. A few days later they were again among hills where no game was to be found. During several days all they had was one raven, to be divided among starving men who had not had a full meal for ten days. Then a buzzard was killed, and, the next day, another was trapped in a deserted beaver stream.

At last one of Jim Pattie's hunting dogs was sacrificed. Only the fact that Jim's father was so weakened that he could travel no farther reconciled the young Kentuckian to the necessity. A few days later, after slow and painful progress, they returned to familiar territory on the San Francisco River, where deer were found, providing them with food and moccasins.

On the way to Santa Fe Jim Pattie again saw Jacova, the governor's daughter, who wept for pity when she saw his wasted figure and his tattered clothes. The governor welcomed the half-dead party.

The other trapping parties into which the members of the expedition had divided had no better luck. Some of them fared far worse, for no less than four of the party headed by Pratte had been killed by the Indians. The majority of the more than one hundred Americans who came into New Mexico were killed during the three years that followed their arrival. Pratte, the leader, died of fever in Santa Fe. The expedition, as an organized affair, went to pieces, and the men wandered here and there in little groups.

After recuperating, the Pattie party procured horses and went back after their buried furs—only to find that all their toil and suffering had been futile; the Indians had discovered and stolen the furs. Then, for a time, the Americans were hired as guards at a silver mine that was being constantly harassed by Indians. Later, on Captain Pattie took over its management, on a lease, and settled down for two years. Through his skill, and his bravery in dealing with the Indians, Pattie succeeded in amassing a fortune in bullion.

During this time, however, Jim Pattie was forever wandering. In spite of the pleadings of his father, who begged him to stay at the silver mine, the young Kentuckian joined one party of hunters or trappers after the other, and roamed northward as far as the Yellowstone, and southward deep into Mexico. Several times he was badly wounded by Indian arrows and the claws of grizzly bears, and never once did he succeed in bringing his furs back safely out of the wilderness. In a remote town in Mexico he again met some of the men of Pratte's expedition, and from them learned that, out of the one hundred and sixteen men who had started with him from Missouri there were then not more than sixteen left alive. Jim sobered down a little when he heard this news.

"A strong perception of the danger of such courses as mine came over my mind, and I made a kind of resolution that I would return to my home and never venture into the woods again," his journal records.

IT WAS, indeed, only a "kind of resolution" for, when Jim rejoined his father and told him that he was now ready to cease wandering and join him in his silver mining, he was on the eve of adventures more prolonged and

perilous than any that had gone before. Captain Pattie had prospered. He had amassed a small fortune, but now every ounce of bullion and every gold coin he had stored up were stolen by his trusted superintendent, a Spaniard. The Patties were ruined.

When the father proposed that they should start trapping beaver once more, Jim gladly consented. At the head of thirty Americans, a few of whom were members of the original Pratte expedition, they pushed westward again in October, 1827. So far as authentic records show, they were the first Americans to cross the trackless deserts of what is now known as Arizona, and the region west of the Colorado River and east of the California mountains, and to reach the Pacific.

It was a journey of ceaseless, incredible hardship and peril. Captain Pattie knew that the most fertile cause of disasters to the American trappers was their fierce individualism and their incurable tendency to break up into smaller parties, or even to wander off by themselves, thus exposing all to the attacks of Indians. A united group of trained riflemen could generally deal successfully with hostile Indians, even against very great odds, but when disagreement and separation came, the result was always serious and frequently fatal. So the members of this party signed an agreement to trap in partnership, and that the first man to attempt to seperate from or desert the main group should be shot.

The agreement did not hold. The misfortunes of the new expedition began almost at once. The trappers reached a part of the country absolutely destitute of game. They were compelled to eat their dogs. Then six of the horses were slaughtered.

"This, to me, was the most cruel task of all," wrote Jim Pattie. "To think of waiting for the night to kill and eat the poor horse that had borne us over deserts and mountains, as hungry as ourselves, and strongly and faithfully attached to us, was no easy task to the heart of a Kentucky hunter." It fell to Jim's lot, finally, to kill his own horse.

Soon after this the dreaded disagreement came, and the party was divided. Six men remained with the Patties, the others striking off by themselves on a different route. Making the most solemn pledges to stick by each other to the death, the smaller party moved along the course of the Gila River, intending to strike across country for the Rio Colorado. From a small tribe of seemingly friendly Indians who spoke some Spanish, they learned that the Spanish settlements could be reached west of the Rio Colorado. This was false. Between the river and the inhabited places in California there stretched one of the most arid deserts of the Southwest.

In spite of the friendly behavior of these Indians, the eight white men felt that their situation was highly dangerous, for among these hundreds of "fierce, naked, swarthy savages eight of us seemed no more than a little patch of snow on the side of one of the black mountains." The Kentuckians left the tribe and encamped that night sixteen miles westward, on the banks of the river, tying their horses to stakes near the camp. A black storm came up in the night, and in the midst of thunder and flooding rain the Indians rushed the camp, cut the horses loose, and drove the terrified beasts away beyond all hope of recovery.

THE Kentucky hunters were almost in despair. They were a thousand miles from the starting point, dismounted, alone in the midst of a country absolutely strange to them, and surrounded by enemies. But the point at which despair could overcome the Kentucky pioneers was never reached. The eight hunters built a raft, floated it along the river, and boldly attacked the Indian town in the hope of recovering their horses. But the town was deserted. The tribe had gone into hiding.

After burning the place, the hunters returned to their camp and built a little fort, to protect them at night. Next they constructed a number of rude yet manageable boats in which to descend the Rio Colorado to the Spanish towns they believed to exist upon its lower banks. In the boats they could carry their furs, and those they trapped as they proceeded.

The beaver were plentiful, which meant ample fur as well as food, supplemented by duck and geese, and for a while they lived in ease. Then they were attacked by, but managed to defeat, a party of the Indians who had stolen their horses, and who had been stealthily following them on shore. Later they encountered Indians who apparently had never seen or heard of white men. With some of these tribes they established friendly relations; by

others they were attacked, but as soon as their guns were heard the terrified assailants invariably ran away.

Doubts as to the correctness of the information concerning the Spanish settlements soon troubled them, and their uneasiness increased as they floated nearer and nearer to where the river empties into the sea water of the Gulf of California and became aware of the action of the tides. These landsmen had never seen salt water; they knew nothing about tidal waves and tidal action, save by vague reports. Near the mouth of the river they were swept ashore by a tide just when they were being menaced by a party of Indians. The new, outrunning tide swept them away safely, however; but at the mouth of the river the surf prevented all egress, and Indians lined both banks.

It was plain that there were no Spanish settlements in this region. Their furs were now valueless, for they could not carry them either forward or backward without horses or mules. Toilsomely they rowed and poled their way back as far as they could, until the descending current became too strong. Then they buried their furs and started out to make their way to the coast of California.

With their rifles, ammunition, blankets, and dried beaver meat, each man was heavily loaded, and their weeks of idle boating had left them unfitted for hard tramping. Two days of excessively difficult travel through the jungle country bordering the river brought them to the open, arid, desolate plain, across which loomed the fair blue mountains of California. Soon their water was exhausted. They found none for two days. The sand under their moccasins was like fire. The sun blazed through the windless, dry air fiercely.

Then they found a little lake. They rushed greedily forward—but the water was salt, too salt even for their consuming thirst to tolerate. Snow-covered hills shone to the westward, and some three or four miles from the lake there were low hills where it seemed that water might be found. Through the thick brine of the lake they swam, pushing little rafts of reeds on which they transported their packs and rifles. On the western shore of the lake they were again disheartened by the discovery of fresh Indian tracks. Better their chances in fighting Indians than the unconquerable foe of thirst, so they followed the trail.

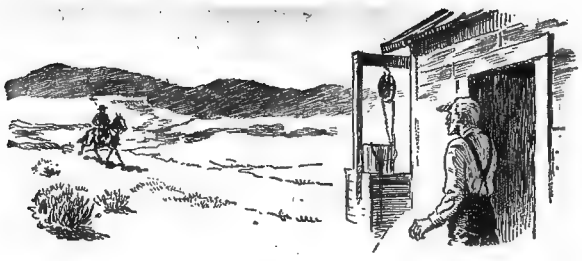
Fortunately, they escaped a battle. When they reached the Indian camp, and water, they found that one Indian spoke Spanish, and they came to a friendly understanding. The Spanish-speaking Indian was a fugitive from one of the missions in California. After resting for several days they hired guides to cross the remainder of the desert, and a few days later they were in California, the first Americans ever to reach it overland.

Even then, their troubles were not over. They were thrown into prison at San Diego by the Mexican governor, and there Sylvester Pattie, worn out by his hardships, died. The rest of the party, after being released, settled in the country and became a portion of the small, yet soon increasing number of Americans who prepared the way for Fremont a few years later.

Jim Pattie, however, made his way home by way of Mexico. Afterward he also seems to have gone back to California. Bancroft, the historian of the West, thinks that he settled in San Diego after the American advent. It would be satisfying to the lover of romance could we know that he found Jacova there—but, as to this, we can only hope he did. We do know beyond doubt that Jim Pattie and his brother Kentuckians were the pioneer advance guard of the American frontier. They traced the trail of American civilization. They gave their lives that the nation might accomplish its great destiny.

POMME BLANCHE

THIS was also known as the white apple, swan-apple, Indian turnip and often as the biscuit-root. It had a great range and was a very important vegetable to the Indians. It was oval in shape, of the size of a hen's or goose egg, and when raw tasted like parsnip. It was encased in a thin, fibrous covering, with an inner white, pulpy substance, and was good raw or cooked. It grew at a depth of three or four inches, on hillsides, plateaus and prairies, usually in a reddish clay loam which is common in fragmentary rocks and gravel. The stalk attained a height of about three inches and looked somewhat like the common sheep-sorrel; it bore a white flower in season. These roots were dug out by the squaws, dried and kept in great quantities. Pounded into a meal, they were cooked with tallow or meat, made into cakes, or, mixed with dried buffalo berries or pounded cherries, the flour was made into a pudding.—C. E. M.



LAND HUNGRY

By BARRY SCOBEE

It all came about because there were two Kay Plumbs. When Kay, the homestead owner, died, the surviving Kay grabbed the coveted land—but holding it was another matter

A STRANGER came riding across the prairie on a pinto pony. Kay Plumb, quick and spry for a gray man beyond middle age, stepped outside the door of his rough board shanty, shading his eyes the better to see.

One Kay Plumb had homesteaded this South Dakota quarter section. Another Kay Plumb—this one shading his eyes beside the door—had come to live on it, pretending that he was the original settler and that the land was his. So he was uneasy about this stranger riding straight toward the shanty; he might be a friend or relative of the original Kay Plumb coming to expose the impostor and claim the land.

The low sun cast a long shadow of the rider and his horse. The old man forgot the possible danger in drinking in the beauty and the friendliness of this land he loved, of the far blue hills, and the smoke rising in homey fashion from his scattered neighbors' stovepipes.

"Lordy," he said to himself, "I don't see how I could ever give this up. I couldn't. I wouldn't!"

The pinto pony came on at a jog trot, the silvery tinkle of bridle rings preceding it. In a few minutes the rider came up, a young man with a straight inquiring glance.

"Good evening," he greeted. "Wonder if I can get a drink of water?"

"Yes, you can."

He climbed down from the saddle with the comment that it had been a hot day. He came forward, level eyes on the old man. He offered his hand.

"My name is Douglas."

Plumb could do no less. He met the handclasp.

"I'm Kay Plumb, sir."

Plumb's eyes were devouring the stranger. That other Kay Plumb, whose land this really was, had had a nephew. Was this young man he?

The young fellow sniffed at the tantalizing odor of supper being wafted from the kitchen.

"What would be the chance," he asked, "of staying all night?"

"Why—why——" stammered Plumb, "I'm hardly fixed for company."

"But I see a good bed in there——"

"Only one bed. You'd have to bunk with me."

"Well, you don't look like a kicker."

"But there's no woman to do the cooking," protested Plumb.

"Just what I like! I don't enjoy being around strange women."

"You—traveling?" fenced the old man.

"Looking over the land. I'm not used to the saddle. I'm tired and sore and the next house is a mile or more from here. If you——"

"Oh, well, I suppose I can keep you over night, if you can put up with my cooking."

He said it half affably at last, but something familiar about the stranger gave him a premonition of evil and he was more uneasy than at any time since leaving Kansas City on his unlawful enterprize.

TWENTY years Kay Plumb had made a living in Kansas City by running elevators in second-class buildings, by employment as a night watchman, by washing windows, but all the while reading hungrily and dreaming of the West—of pioneer days, of advancing civilization, of homesteading and above all of owning a piece of land, taming it and making it his home. He saved a dime here and a dollar there.

"Some day I'll cut loose all holts and go West," he would tell his friends; he had no family. "Worked a lot on the farm when I was a boy and been hankerin' to get back ever since."

One morning a newsboy friend called his attention to an advertisement of uncalled-for mail in the morning paper. Kay Plumb's name was there. He was astonished. From whom could there be a letter for him? Having no windows to wash he hurried to the main uptown post office to inquire.

In the long, cool corridor of the post office he studied the windows to see which one to approach. An old man like himself was standing near, apparently engaged in a similar effort. Uncle Kay, as newsies, janitors, building managers, and the like called him, sidled over to the stranger.

"Pardner," said he, "can you point me to the window where you call for advertised letters?"

"That's what I'm looking for," grunted the other.

Uncle Kay was resourceful in a small way and he liked to display his resourcefulness. He scanned the windows. One was lettered "General Delivery—Information."

"Let's try this hole in the wall," he suggested.

The stranger was not unwilling. They stepped across to the wicket. A woman clerk peered out at them.

"Is this the place—" began the man.

"—where you ask for advertised letters?" finished Uncle Kay eagerly.

"What name?" asked the woman, reaching to a pigeonhole.

"Kay Plumb," both men piped out together.

So intent was each that they did not notice the likeness in names.

"Which is Kay Plumb?" the clerk demanded.

"Me."

"I am."

Then they comprehended and turned startled, hostile looks on each other.

"I was born with it," said Uncle Kay emphasizing "I."

"I was too," retorted the other.

The woman began to run through the letters swiftly. Abruptly she paused, a white envelope caught up in her fingers.

"Where would you expect a letter from?" she asked, looking at Uncle Kay.

"Uh—might be from any place."

That was sufficient. She turned her shrewd glance on the other Kay Plumb.

"I've got a sister in Sour Lick, Ohio," he said briefly.

"This letter is postmarked Sour Lick, and it is addressed in a woman's writing."

She regarded him judicially.

"Two names just alike are common enough—and you've both seen it in the morning paper and rushed up here," she murmured her thoughts aloud. Then to Kay Plumb the second, "I believe you are entitled to it, but it would only be fair to this other gentleman for you to open it right here in his presence."

She thrust the envelope out. With bony, trembling fingers the favored man tore off the end and drew out two folded sheets of pen-and-ink paper ruled with blue lines. After a look at them he laid the last page down on the wicket shelf and pointed to the signature. "Y'r aff'ct sister, Luella."

"It's yours all right," conceded Uncle Kay. "I've got no sister."

They made way at the window, stepping back to a high table along the wall, where the tremulous old figure leaned to read his letter. Uncle Kay, held by the thread of similar names and by some pathetic quality in the other, hovered near. The second man was gaunt and looked sick; his high, narrow forehead, now uncovered, exuded perspiration. His mouth sagged: a beaten man. Compassion welled up in the onlooker. When the reader finished he refolded the letter and with quick petulance tore it into bits and flung them to the floor.

"All about her and her son, my nephew," he said, "but nothing more substantial."

"You're sweating on your forehead," said Uncle Kay. "You're all shaky." He put a friendly hand on the other's shoulder. "Where you working? Where you living?"

"Ain't working. As to living—I've got a bench in the park."

"I thought so. Listen here, seein' we're namesakes, you come along with me for a day or two. Tomorrow I can get you in on some window-washing if you want a little work."

The stranger hesitated. Uncle Kay exerted pressure on the arm. The man seemed too heartless to resist. He went shuffling along with the good Samaritan.

Kay Plumb Number Two did not wash windows the next day. Instead he spent a week in Uncle Kay's one-room bachelor quarters recuperating from famine and bad whisky. Readily he confessed that he did not possess a penny in the world.

"All I've got," he said with an apologetic little laugh, "is a quarter section of land in South Dakota."

"Land!" shouted Uncle Kay. "A hundred and sixty acres? And you battin' around a city!"

"Baw! It ain't worth the filing fee and the taxes I've spent on it."

"Man, I've been saving pennies for twenty years and a-hankerin' to go West and take up a homestead, and it seemin' like I never could get enough money scraped together, or get footloose, or make up my mind, or something. And here you've got land and ain't on it."

"Worthless, I tell ye. I patented it fifteen years ago. Me and all my neighbors was froze out in winter, or burned out in summer. I paid taxes six or eight years and then couldn't sell for what I'd put in, so I quite foolin' with it."

"But you can redeem it by payin' up the taxes."

"Uh—huh; well, maybe I will sometime when I get on my feet."

All this was on the first day as guest. In the following days all that Uncle Kay could talk about was the homestead. Little by little he extracted from the morose owner the story of the locating, the rigors of homesteading; learned about the nearest town, about the roads, about the land itself, the shanty house and shanty stable, and the neighbors.

"You ask questions like you're going out there and impersonate me and seize that land," commented the owner once in a half-suspicious manner.

Uncle Kay laughed and kept on, missing nothing in the way of sunshine or wind, creek or spring, neighbors or dates.

The victim of a hard life said he had proof of his homestead in his belongings that were being held by a former landlord. Uncle Kay spent good money redeeming the belongings: an old satchel with a few unlaundered garments, some picture postcards, a book of jokes, a razor hone, and the Government's patent paper and a few tax receipts for the South Dakota homestead.

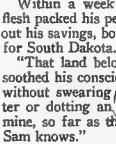
The first morning that Kay Plumb the Second, owner of the precious land, went out to work on a window-washing job he jumped from an eighth story window to the pavement below with his wash pail held up arm's length above his head. This gave the news correspondents a chance to send out a facetious little story of the sort that goes all over the country, about a man plunging with pail for parachute. Uncle Kay did not witness the tragedy, but he was on hand in time to aid the police with judicious information and to keep them from finding the patent paper of the homestead or the tax receipts. The other possessions he turned over to the officers.

Uncle Kay was sorely torn between the desire to tell the truth and the desire not to tell too much. He couldn't remember what town the sister's letter had come from, nor even the state, making a guess that it was Illinois. Nor could any of the slight acquaintances of the suicide tell anything of importance. So the police, ignorant of the land right, dropped the matter, Kay Plumb was buried, and it was all over.

Within a week the Kay Plumb in the flesh packed his personal possessions, drew out his savings, bought a ticket, and headed for South Dakota.

"That land belongs to Kay Plumb," he soothed his conscience. "I'm Kay Plumb, without swearing to a lie, changing a letter or dotting an i; therefore the land is mine, so far as the tax collector or Uncle Sam knows."

"Land is mine—land is mine—no more washing windows—washing windows," the car wheels seemed to hum on the rails.



UNCLE KAY, riding across the prairie just like this young stranger at his door, had found the quarter section without difficulty, had located and recognized it by the descriptions garnered word by word from the other

Kay Plumb, as well as by the technical description of range, township, and section on an old corner marker.

The surrounding country was settling up again. All of it was homesteaded and three fourths was occupied. The old plain board shanty and the rickety stable that the original Plumb had built had been deprived of doors and windows, probably by other settlers going past and seeing an abandoned place. Uncle Kay went to work with avidity, spending money liberally. He bought two worked-down brown mares at the livery stable in town and an old farm wagon and began hauling lumber and materials.

How he loved to ride along half dreaming, with the sunshine pouring down on his hands and knees, or the wind from a thousand miles of prairie pressing against his face. The old hands that had pulled levers in elevators or tried doorknobs on night-watch jobs now fondled the lines of the team, at last an owner of horses, a pioneer, a homesteader.

"No more window-washing for me!" he would triumph.

He bought a plow too, and some Plymouth Rock hens, and the necessary things for his house. To a man plunging in winter wheat he rented a hundred and thirty acres of the land at a dollar and a half cash an acre, and spent the money in improvements. He had a well dug, striking water at thirty-six feet, and he set out cottonwood trees below the horse trough.

When all this was accomplished his money was gone, but he was contented—save for the fear that some day the nephew or sister of the other Kay Plumb would come riding across the prairie, like this young man waiting courteously at the door.

"I'll put up your pony, Mr. Douglas," offered Uncle Kay, desiring to escape from that level scrutiny so that he could analyze, think, plan. "Wash up there at the well, if you want. Pan's on the nail. Supper's ready all but frying eggs and salt pork."

Uncle Kay's hand trembled with the bridle rein as he led the pony to the extra stall in the little stable. His thoughts were tumbling over one another.

"Is he the nephew? Those level eyes—what'll he do? I won't give up the land!"

He fed the pinto ear corn, and he patted the brown mares, one nuzzling his hand.

"Moll and Doll," he whispered affectionately.

He took the cobs out of their boxes and broke off the little ends, that still held a few dwarfed grains, and threw them outside to the dozen hens. The cobs he retained for fuel.

He walked reluctantly toward the house, dreading to face the stranger. Half-way he paused and gazed again at the distant hills and at the long shadows close at hand.

"My land!" he said fiercely to himself. "I wouldn't give it up. I'd kill first."

When Uncle Kay entered the house the young man, washed and combed, was folding his coat over at the foot of the bed. The room was dusky. His features were not plain. Uncle Kay lighted the lamp, and as he set it on the table Douglas came near. The old man started back, gasping, slack-jawed.

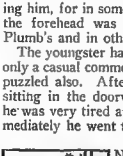
"What's the matter? What's wrong?" demanded Douglas, alarmed.

"Nothing, nothing, I'm just took a bit by—by——"

He couldn't finish. To hide his confusion he stuffed cobs into the stove to finish supper.

But something was wrong; the guest had the high, narrow forehead of the other Kay Plumb. Or so it had seemed in that first startling glance. As the old man prepared supper, and as they ate, he kept sending furtive glances at the stranger, studying that forehead. This only resulted in puzzling him, for in some lights, some positions, the forehead was the Kansas City Kay Plumb's and in others it was not.

The youngster had little to say. He made only a casual comment or two. He seemed puzzled also. After the meal he smoked, sitting in the doorway; then he said that he was very tired and would turn in. Immediately he went to sleep.



UNCLE KAY turned in wearily after he had finished the evening chores, inside and outside. He stretched out on the other side of the bed carefully so as not to disturb Douglas, but he did not go to sleep. His thoughts were too busy.

"Is this the nephew? Is this the nephew?"

The question kept stringing through his mind endlessly. It was interrupted momentarily along in the night when he fell into a doze, from which he roused in a nightmarish dream of being back in the city washing windows. After that another aspect of the situation mingled with the question: what could he do if the young man were the nephew?

"Make 'way with him!"

The thought came as inspiration. He lay a long time mulling it over. He had left the door open for fresh air. The noises of the night came in plainly. Now and then one of the brown mares sneezed. Hours passed. The next logical step was to make certain whether the guest was the other Kay Plumb's nephew. But how could he make certain? The answer was another inspiration.

"Search the coat there on the foot of the bed for evidence!"

Uncle Kay sat up with a jerk. Why hadn't he thought of that long before? The disturbance made Douglas stir, and sigh, and turn over, and lift his head as if awake. Immediately he fell back again in sleep.

The old man waited a long time, then proceeded with a plan he had arranged. He searched the coat soundlessly, finding papers in the inside pocket. With these and matches and the lamp he went out to the side of the house away from the wind and made his examination. The papers consisted of a notebook, a new postcard, and a letter addressed in a fine hand, "Mr. Kay Douglas Browne, Cincinnati." With shaking fingers the old man, squatting by the flickering lamp on the ground, proceeded to read the communication.

My Dear Son:

I found the enclosed clipping in a Cincinnati paper. Undoubtedly the man is my poor brother, your Uncle Kay. He has been in Kansas City for years. It makes me sad. It was too late to telegraph, but to tell the truth I didn't have the money to spare. I'm not able to support myself any longer. I'm not blaming you, sonny. You don't seem to get along in the city. But here's a chance for us and God knows we need it. In his last letter Kay said he still owned the Dakota claim. You go out, sonny, and if it looks o. k. I'll follow you out. You've always wanted to go West on land. Maybe it's our chance for a home. Don't lose any time, if you've got the money to go on. I've never had a real home. I need one now. I'm sick. I don't complain often, do I sonny? I'd be willing to live on the barest ranch. I haven't written you all this before because——

Uncle Kay broke off impatiently and turned to the signature. "Lovingly y'r mother, Luella Browne." He glanced at the clipping—"Uses Pail for Parachute." It told briefly of Kay Plumb's suicide. The proof was ample: the boy in there asleep was the other Plumb's nephew come for the homestead. Dazedly he collected the papers, blew out the light, and reentered the house.

Setting the lamp on the table he stepped to the foot of the bed and stood looking with bitter thoughts at the sleeping form. Moonlight streamed in at the door and window. The features of Douglas were almost discernible. Sudden perspiration broke out on the old man's face. Hastily he restored the papers to the pocket and tiptoed out.

"Lord," he gulped, "I can't make away with a sick woman's only support. He's her only hope—except the land."

Uncle Kay chuckled mirthlessly. Except this land. The most precious thing on earth to him.

He commenced to blunder around in the moonlight. He did not really think. His mind seemed hard and frozen like ice.

He found himself at the old wagon. He seized a wheel with both hands and shook it in abstract anger. He went to the well. After a minute he drew up a bucket of water and carried it beyond the horse trough to the newly set cottonwood saplings. His hardness turned to emotion.

"Little trees," he said as he poured the water at their roots, "I thought when I set ye out that I'd be here to see you grown up into sturdy youths o' trees."

He stumbled along to the far side of the quarter section and part way back, stopping to gaze at the plowed wheat ground. He crossed to the brown mares staked out for grass. They came up on their tethers close to him, whinnying eagerly.

"Old Moll and Doll," he said tenderly. "A Kansas City window-washer can't keep a span o' horses."

He stroked and petted them for a while. The east was growing light. He had been on the trouble path all night. He loosed the mares and led them to the stable and fed them of the meager corn supply and the pinto pony too. Then he squatted in the doorway shelling corn for the crowding hens and wattled rooster.

The sun came up, a red ball promising heat.

"In that direction," thought Uncle Kay bitterly, "and to the southward, lies Kansas City and a window-washing job."

He got up, grim and determined. When a man had a disagreeable task to do he might as well go and attend to it.

He had expected to awaken Kay Douglas Browne, but the young man was al-

ready up on the edge of the bed half dressed. Uncle Kay did not find it easy to open his remarks. He cleared his throat—and began breakfast preparations. He made a fire, fanning the first thick smoke away with a pot lid, and he drew fresh water for coffee.

Breakfast was presently ready and still he had not risen to the point of speaking of his decision. As they sat down to eat Douglas announced that when they finished the meal he would saddle the pinto pony and go riding among the neighbors for a "talk and look at things."

"He wants to make inquiries about me," Uncle Kay said to himself.

He was relieved. This would save him from speaking in person. He would write a note.

"Sure," he agreed, "look the country over, but be sure to get back for dinner."

"Yes, thanks."

The boy flushed and the puzzled look returned.

WHEN the guest had ridden away and the dishes were disposed of, the old hands found a pencil and a bit of wrapping paper and began to compose a letter. Finished, Uncle Kay hooked it securely on a nail in the door, where it could not be overlooked.

This accomplished, he had meant to proceed with his plan, but instead he sat musing and pondering, reluctant to take the steps that would remove him from this place he had come to love so much. As he pondered the tiny seed of an idea sprouted in his mind and began to grow.

Almost startled, he hopped up and busied himself in earnest. He harnessed Moll and Doll and hitched them to the wagon, then drove the wagon up to the door of the house, where he proceeded to load on every article that he felt rightfully belonged to him.

All the while he was deep in thought, pausing now and then to stare absently into space as he turned over the idea in his mind.

In what he took and what he left he tried to be fair and square. He had taken in money on the wheat land but he had spent part of it in boring the well. He had left of that and his own money less than ten dollars.

When at last the division was complete and the wagon loaded and all ready to pull out, the old man lifted the note from the nail in the door to add one more sentence that he felt was due in justice to himself. He read over the finished product:

Mr. Kay Douglas Plumb—

I am Kay Plumb all right but not your uncle. He killed himself. I have been faking—Am going away. Don't worry about me. I've got money and I know where I can get work. I couldn't keep this land and be contented.

Kay Plumb.

Squeezed in between the last word and his signature was the added sentence, "And it wouldn't be honest to do so."

He stuck the bit of paper back on the nail and mounted the wagon seat.

"Moll, Doll, step along; hit the trail!"

The mares moved; the wagon creaked. They headed toward the road. Uncle Kay sat straight and grim, never once looking back.

At the road that ran east and west the team stopped for lack of guidance on the reins. The great thoughtfulness was on Uncle Kay again, as if he might be contemplating turning back. For a full minute he did not move; then slowly he lifted his head and looked along the road eastward.

"Yon's the way to Kanses City and window-washing," he mused. "And t'other side is the way out West. I'm broke; I'm getting along in years; I'm a stranger but——"

He straightened up; his chest protruded unwittingly; he clucked to the mares and reined them westward.

"Moll, Doll, get along," he urged in new cheeriness. "I've got the window-washing job beat. There's land out West somewheres for me. We're going to find it and be pioneers from the ground up!"

BUFFALO SLAUGHTER

IN 1832 a party of five or six hundred Sioux Indians went on a buffalo hunt for a few hours and returned with fourteen hundred fresh buffalo tongues, which they sold to some traders for a few gallons of cheap whisky. From this it would seem that the Indians' charge of wanton slaughter of buffalo against the whites would hardly hold in a court of equity, if they had to "come in with clean hands."—C. E. M.

VOICE OF THE .303

By WILLIAM BYRON MOWERY

A terrific-hitting, deadly weapon is the .303, carrying quick death to the hungry wolf packs and slinking carcajous of the far North; but for Le Noir Barbe its voice developed a significance more terrifying than death.

AS HE broke out of a snow-bowed spruce drogue and started across the buried lake, Michael Allard stopped suddenly and turned his face toward the northeast sky. His features were numbed by the bitter still-cold. From the puppy-fur mittens hung around his shoulders, he withdrew his hands and held one up, palm to the north-east.

A fine stinging, as of unseen shot. Then a larger, a visible particle of dry snow. Then a flake that clung and melted against the warmth of his hand. Then a larger and wetter flake.

The small circle of his face that was exposed by the white-fox dickey-hood showed Michael Allard a courageous, warm-hearted liveyere in his early forties; deep tanned olive; firm jaw and mouth; and glinty black eyes which knew how to be merry but now were full of troubled fear.

"A snow northeaster!" he muttered aloud. "In half an hour the tracks will be whipped shut and buried."

Michael was back-tracking the trail made by two big dogs that ran side by side. Between them, a dragging rope had left a snaky, sinuous sign. Allard bent to tighten the toe-thong of his racquet and broke into the swift, wide-swinging run which quickly brings *mal de raquette* to the groin muscles of the inexperienced at snowshoeing.

Before he was across the mile-wide lake, the whining wind had dimmed the trail. Allard shifted his small shoulder pack and flung himself into the spruces again. His swift pace was dangerous in that thirty-odd-below weather; his quick, deep breathing burned his lungs. From time to time he put his nose in the fur of the mitten.

All afternoon he had followed that back-trail, since Mac's two dogs, still harnessed to their broken bow-line, had pawed against his cabin door. They had run off and come to him before. It was a by-word that all the runaway huskies thereabouts showed up at Michael's trapping shack. He had a way with dogs. He could catch the eye of a snarling half-wolf, toss him a cod-head, thump him in the ribs, tousle him in the snow, and have the grinning brute pawing his jacket in a few minutes. Whenever a trapper lost his "pups," he snowshoed across deerbush and swells to Allard's shack, sure to find them there.

But that broken komatik harness was an ominous sign, and a wild fear had lingered in the brown eyes of the huskies. Delaying only to scramble a pack together, he had set out on the back trail, certain that something had happened to Mac, his nearest neighbor.

Mac was almost a stranger in that re-

gion. He was a middle-aged liveyere; that is, a year-around resident on the Labrador, who fished in Rigolette Bay during the summer and trapped inland during the winter. Allard had visited him several times, and formed a deep liking for the gruff Scott. He sympathized, too, with the man's struggle to provide for his family in the Bay, where the cod had failed that season and trapping was very poor. In October he had helped Mac, then a total stranger, to tail out a good fur-path, and had visited him or exchanged messages at least once a month. Their cabins were twenty miles apart, for the saying runs, "You want a lot o' room to trap fox, b'y."

Two miles beyond the lake, Allard suddenly ran across Mac's small komatik, or narrow, pliant dog-sled built Innuit fashion. It was wedged between twin-spruces that were too close together to let it follow the dogs. He kicked it upright, saw it was loaded for a trip, threw a quick glance around without seeing Mac, and sprinted on again. The trail was heavier now. The komatik had careened over the snow as if the dogs had been flying from some grisly fear.

Shortly after he found the komatik, Allard became aware of other tracks paralleling those of the dogs. He stopped a second to examine. They numbered ten; and the largest measured four inches from claw to heel. He unslung his rifle, for he was plunging down the pink granite terraces toward Sinigimau Valley. Hordes of barren-ground wolves, hunger-driven from the Nascaupee height-of-land, concentrated in its heavy wooded bottoms at that time of the year.

Before he came to the river drogue of balsam and alder and shadowy spruce, Allard knew intuitively that the trail he was following would end in that tangle. As he approached, he slowed his pace. Fearfully, afraid of coming too suddenly upon the scene, he threaded the thicket.

"Bon dieu! Misericorde!"

He stopped at the edge of a small, clear place and stared down at the sleeve of Mac's coat. Raising his eyes, he saw bedraggled and paddled snow ahead. The stock of a rifle protruded from a drift.

Allard stood motionless in his tracks. At first he could not think. The tragedy, though common enough along Starvation Coast, overpowered him. Only after long minutes had dragged by could he force himself to look for signs and to read them.

THERE was no doubting what had taken place there; no room for hope. But Allard was puzzled. He could not understand why Mac had been caught and killed by ten wolves, especially after he had been warned strictly about the gray hordes in Sinigimau Valley. No dead ones lay in the open place or had dragged off into the thickets. Yet, there was the carbine-style .303, whose terrific-hitting, soft-nosed bullets should have meant death to six of the pack. Had the lever action jammed on him? What had happened?

Allard pulled the rifle out of the snow. The lever worked freely, but the magazine was empty. The chamber held a cartridge. Unfired, Michael chanced to note. He looked at it closely. The hammer had fallen on it; the plunger had centered its deep round dent.

"Que diable!" he exclaimed. "Why did it not shoot?"

Allard carried a .303 himself. In ten years he could not remember a single cartridge which had failed to explode. Outwardly the one in his hand looked perfect. The puzzle deepend. He began to realize that that unexploded cartridge explained Mac's death. But to explain the cartridge?

The soft-nosed bullet had a demi-packet of steel which fitted snugly into the cartridge casing but was not crimped or toed-in. Allard put this jacket between his teeth and pulled it from the casing. It came out easily. He tilted the casing upon his hand. It should have held a sizeable amount of powder to develop its muzzle velocity of two thousand foot-seconds. Not a grain rolled out!

Using his racket to sift the snow, Allard began probing about in the clear place for the other five shells. He found them all in one spot. Mac had stood in his tracks and pumped them out of the magazine. Their caps were dented precisely as the first one had been. He pulled out the bullets. None held powder!

From a granite swell close by a wolf howled. Lengthening purple shadows warned that the short February afternoon would soon yield to dusk. The blizzard, after its brief warning, had swooped with all its cold, clutching ferocity.

But Allard paid no heed. He stood there, legs wide apart, the cartridges in his hand, dry-eyed, thinking. Suspicion mounted within him. The powder had

been removed by human agency. Not by Mac, for he had relied upon his .303 in his moment of great need. Who had done it? Allard thought of the other trappers within reach. He knew them all, and brushed suspicion of any of them aside. What reason for removing the powder and sending Mac to his death? He could think of none. What had Mac been doing so far off his fur-path, with the komatik loaded for a trip? He could not guess.

He could scarcely believe any human capable of so brutal a deed. Yet the conviction grew strong and clear in Allard's mind that here was murder done.

A flicker of gray in a thicket warned him he had no time to tarry. Mac's cabin was a straight seven miles ahead, and only half as far away as his own. He must make it before nightfall, for the wolves would trail him out of the valley. He hurried through the balsams and across the Sinigimau. There in a thicket he waited. Several thin forms filtered out of the thickets and loped along his trail. With four quick shots Michael sprawled three of them on the snow. A fourth dragged itself back into the alders. The pack temporarily was checked. They would not attack until dark. Reloading as he ran, he headed northwest across the swells for Mac's cabin.

He reached it just before dark. First rekindling the fire and lighting a caribou-tallow candle, Allard looked about for some hint that would explain the tragedy. He found none. Everything lay just as it had fallen from Mac's hand. But in the notch above the bunk, where they had traded messages several times, he found a scrawled slip. By the light of the tallow candle he read:

Dear Michael:

I been ekspekting U to cum bi lakely but U aint cum so I am cuming to yur shack this morning, so if U cum here wait for me. Go take a squint at that black focks in thee fur-loft. Aint it thee purtiest ebony U ever seen? I found a hole litter of them up thee Sinigimau bout twenty miles in that off-shoot vallie with thee balancing bowlders, I want U to help me trapp them because U shared good grounds with me and bekause I have knoticed somebodys been nosing around. I don't kno who.

Mac.

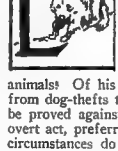
Allard stood on a block and looked into the little boarded-off corner under the roof. The rest of Mac's hard-won peltry, a pitifully small catch, was there; but the black pelt was gone. The last doubt that Mac had been murdered vanished from Allard's mind.

That night he sat up, staring at the dull red sides of the stove. He visioned the big, raw-boned Scot sitting opposite him and talking in his rough burr about the foxes they would take together. There had been no call for him to give away the half of his own good luck. But that was just like Mac—to discover what every liveyere on the Labrador dreams nightly about and then to share it.

Through the hours of that night a scheme formed slowly in Michael Allard's brain. Bit by bit he built it up, till every step was clear. He must find the murderer. He must get those foxes, Mac's rightful discovery, and send them to the Scot's family. He must avenge the murder. Mac had come among strangers; the law that would avenge him was a thousand miles away. Allard felt the whole burden resting upon his own shoulders. He did not look upon it as vengeance, but as justice, which he alone could or would mete out.

Simple, quick death at the bark of a .303 would be a travesty on justice. The murderer must suffer beforehand some of the terrors which Mac had suffered when his rifle clicked on dead cartridges and he clubbed the weapon at springing wolves.

The next morning, while the blizzard blotted out his tracks instantly, Michael left the cabin and hurried back to his own.



LE NOIR BARBE was cautious. The Micmacs, with whom he lived when he was not loping the bush, called him "the skunk-bear" or carcajou, most cunning and cautious of animals. Of his score of crimes ranging from dog-thefts to murder, not one could be proved against him. He avoided any overt act, preferring to set a trap and let circumstances do the work for him. In spite of all the evil with which his name was connected from Chidley to the Horse-chops, not a shred of proof trammeled him.

He took no chances. The prize would be his if he played carefully. He had seen the Scot going down into the Sinigimau with dead cartridges in his .303 and the shadows of death on his trail. For a week

thereafter he waited. It would not be wise to rush into the valley.

When he did go, he searched it thoroughly for signs of a human being, and found none. It was a horseshoe valley of thirty thousand acres, a wild tract of deer-bush, scrubby conifers and boulder jumbles, completely surrounded by a high rock wall which narrowed almost to an arrow-flight at the lower end. In the lemming caves Le Noir made his dry sets. Along the bed of the frozen streams and among the boulder jumbles he built his baited deadfalls, sledding the throat-logs and tongue-pieces from the Sinigimau spruce belt. From its watershed to its affluence with the larger stream, he sprinkled the valley with fox-beds, jumping sets and every trap-line artifice in his skill.

A warm cave beneath the cliff in the upper valley was his station. On its rock shelves out of reach of his dogs he put the pelts he took, his grub, and his canister of cartridges. In the cave's mouth he kept a fire at night, and tied there a pair of huskies while he was gone.

For the first few days, while his sets were still green, he took no foxes. Then one morning, among the several reds and faint rusty patches, he found a pretty silver in a deadfall baited with a plucked rock-ptarmigan. It was a yearling—evidence that a litter ranged the valley. Le Noir exulted. When he lifted another silver the next morning and found it a beautiful match to the first, his exultation soared. That night, beside his handful of fire, he fingered the two pelts. His hatchet-face, pleasant as the front end of a snake, turned from one to the other in unappeasable delight.

His exultation was a little dampened by an incident which happened shortly thereafter. Needing fresh meat, he decided to shoot a caribou. Two miles down the Sinigimau was a "yard." It was a web of browsing paths with a small, hard-trampled circle in the center where the gray bulls could fight off the wolf packs. Thither he went one afternoon when he had finished his fur-path. Leaving his team a few hundred steps away, he crept up from windward.

A yearling buck raised its head out of a deep path. Le Noir beaded it and pulled. His rifle clicked.

The sensation jarred him, as if he had been struck a blow. Slowly the shotgun butt of the .303 came down from his shoulder. He scratched his matted hair. The buck saw him, snorted, whirled about, and leaped away. The move brought Le Noir out of his bewilderment. He pumped another shell into the chamber and pressed the trigger again. This time came the spurt and bark. The caribou threw its head back on its shoulders, pawed the air as if fighting, and dropped.

Before going to his kill, Le Noir picked the cartridge from the snow and looked at it. The plunger had centered its perfect dent. Prompted by memory of a visit to Mac's cabin, Le Noir bit into the bullet, tore it out, and turned the casing upon his hand.

Not a grain of powder came out.

"S'pristi!" he spluttered in Montaignais French. "That cartridge, I must have mixed it with mine when I sent that Scot *habitant* hellwards. *Parbleu*, had I been close pressed by a pack of *loupes affames!* Damn carelessness on my part."

Le Noir was not so sure of this a few days later.

A carcajou began dogging his trap-line. He trailed the marauder into a blind canyon and sent two of his huskies to drive it out. It ran up a steep rock wall where the dogs could not follow. He pressed the trigger.

His rifle clicked. Not once but three straight times. The carcajou escaped over the ledge. Le Noir, in a nervous rigor, examined the shells.

That night he carefully went over all his cartridges. Seven or eight of them were empty of powder. He swore a string of *s'pristi's* at his carelessness. He could not understand how it happened. The more he turned it over in his brain, the more was he mystified.

That same night, beside his cone of fire with the blizzard thrusting its invisible face into the cave, a dim fear was born deep down in Le Noir Barbe's heart.

The coming of day and of a copper sun swinging low on the southern horizon after many days of storm, stilled his night-born fears. Further, he caught a black beauty, easily half-a-thousand dollar pelt. He felt no more fear. The rifle would click on a dead cartridge no more.

Daily his exultation grew, as one by one he got that splendid litter—quicker, much quicker, than he had reckoned upon. In a month he could clear out. Sell his furs down the Labrador coast beyond suspicious eyes. Do what he damned wanted for the rest of his days. It was time, he realized. He knew not what day some liveyere, with a blood vengeance against

him, would spot him and place a soft-nosed bullet between his shoulder blades.

He had lifted six precious foxes besides the one stolen; he had worked himself into the highest pitch of exultation, when the smashing blow fell.

DURING that frozen, terrifically cold February the ptarmigan and bulging-eyed rabbit had disappeared. Gyr-falcons were frozen on their perches, starved. The caribou had all yarded for defense against the famished packs that swung up and down the Sinigimau.

Le Noir kept a sharp eye on the wolves. He carried extra cartridges and a belt ax. When he went outside his sheltered range into the Sinigimau, he had to battle them constantly. Several times he stopped a rush by wholesale shooting of the boldest brutes. Spite of their famine, they were loathe to enter the little valley; its narrow mouth seemed too like a trap.

One late afternoon he was just returning to the little valley, a bit later than he had expected. The pack was all about him in the balsam clumps. A great old male loped out of a thicket on the trail ahead, and crouched as the man and dog approached. Behind it were shadows, more cautious, but ready.

Le Noir had to break that circle which hemmed him; had to stop that gathering rush. He jerked his rifle to his cheek and pulled.

The .303 clicked.

In a sudden frenzy he threw another cartridge into the chamber. This time the rifle responded to his finger. The old male jumped up stiff-legged and sprawled flat with a convulsive kick. Again and again, till he emptied the gun, Le Noir fired at shadows in the thickets. They melted away. He backed into the valley, the while he heard furious snarling in the thickets where he had dropped wolves. He turned and ran for his cave, gripped by a fear that was more than a fear of the pack.

Le Noir tried to reason, after he had recovered from his shaking fright. Had he examined all the cartridges? He could have sworn—and did swear—that he had. But one had clicked on him. Why? No powder. Again, why? It had been taken out by—whom? And how? Le Noir looked around in the shadows of his little cave. His reasoning was balked at the question.

Someone could have entered the cave during the day and the whirling snowspume would cover tracks. But the dogs? Always when he left he had tied a pair in the cave mouth, to guard the precious peltry. They were surly brutes, viciously trained, unapproachable. They would have throttled anybody who tried to enter.

Le Noir was superstitious; he was beginning to believe those empty cartridges were the work of a malevolent spirit which was hurling his murder-guilt back upon his own head. In daylight with his .303 in his hand, he was contemptuous of anything he could not see with his eyes. But that night beside his fire, vague notions which were an inheritance from his quarter of Micmac blood surged through him. He groped for the "who" and the "how" of those empty cartridges. With all natural explanation cut off, his mind turned toward the Unnatural and Unknown. He shivered; was glad when his dogs inched up to the fire.

The next morning he lifted a silver and a black, and brought them back to the cave before starting down the right side of the valley. But the pelts did not assuage his shuddering fear. He felt a terror at the thought of the gray hordes that would assail him if he ventured out into the Sinigimau Valley; but his terror was as nothing compared to his terror of the thing which hovered around him in the valley of balancing boulders. With his .303 he had a chance to fight off the hordes, but another night in the cave might find invisible hands at his throat.

He decided to leave the range that same day. Even there the wolves were getting more and more dangerous. His rifle could scarcely hold them off. A pack of more than a score came into the little valley and dogged him on that second trip. Before he could scatter them, he used up the cartridges in the rifle and the dozen in his belt. When he got to the other shells, one clicked on him. He grabbed it from the snow and backed a hundred steps into his cave.

The dead cartridge felt light in his palm. Feverishly he tore it apart. A little roll of white. Uncrumpling, Le Noir Barbe read:

Le Noir, this is Mac, U got me, Le Noir, but I cant go till U cum too.

And another:

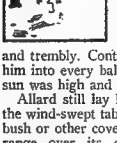
Le Noir, I cant talk to U only bi this

voice of the .303. U understand its langwige, Le Noir.

And still another:

Le Noir, the fockes are gone. They wudnt do U any good, Le Noir, for U kno that him as takes thee soard shal purrish bi thee soard.

Le Noir Barbe read no more. He threw the other cartridges from him. In his frenzy he abandoned komatik, outfit, the cheaper peltry, everything save a light shoulder pack. Without looking at them, he seized his last canister of cartridges from the shelf where it had sat; and stuffed them into his pockets, into his belt, into his gun.



FROM on top the high cliff directly above the cave, Michael Allard watched him go. Le Noir's face was blank and expressionless, mask-like, as if frozen. His step was hurried and trembly. Continually he glanced about him into every balsam shadow, though the sun was high and bright.

Allard still lay hidden in the snow, for the wind-swept tableland was bare of deer-bush or other covert. The wolves did not range over its desolate, high terraces. Those in the valley could not get up over the cliff.

Not until Le Noir Barbe had passed out of the little valley into the Sinigimau, did Allard rise up and head across the swells for his home cabin.

SMOKE of Smokes, Michael Allard!"

The factor at the H. B. house turned the pelts and stared pop-eyed at each. The tiny pack weighed less than eight pounds, but it was worth half as many thousand dollars.

"You will see, *m'sieur* to getting them to Mac's family?" Allard asked anxiously.

The factor nodded.

"But tell me the story of Mac again," he urged. "There is something—I have heard——"

"What?" Allard demanded.

"That the black Barbe was seen near Sinigimau Valley. Maybe he killed the Scot instead of wolves, thinking to get the furs."

Michael shook his head. In his account not a word had he uttered about the dead cartridges.

"No, *m'sieur*, I saw with my own eyes how Mac died. But there is truth in this tale about Le Noir Barbe. For it was only a week ago, *m'sieur*, that I heard a pawing at my cabin door, late at night while a blizzard roared. I opened the door. There was his team of dogs, *m'sieur*. But Le Noir Barbe, he never came after them!"

FIRST THRESHING MACHINE ACROSS THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

THE first threshing machine ever transported across the plains by ox-team was taken across in 1859 by the freighting company of Russell, Majors & Waddell, operating on the old Santa Fe and the Oregon trails. The machine was loaded at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and taken to Fort Bridger, Wyoming, then in unorganized territory. Judge Carter, a government trader and contractor, owned a ranch near Bridger, and when his wheat crop became too extensive for the old method of flailing and tramping out the grain with oxen, he ordered a small separator of the "groundhog" type with treadmill power. The machinery was loaded on a heavy freight wagon pulled by ten yoke of oxen, and was put in charge of William Grinstead, an experienced wagon master of the freighting company.

When viewed from a distance, the brightly painted machine presented a striking appearance. Freighters and immigrants who had taken the trail on the opposite side of the Platte River came across at the first opportunity to see what had appeared to them as a steamboat being towed across the plains by a string of oxen.

A premium of seventy-five dollars was given to the wagon master and his men for getting the machine safely across to its destination. At dangerous places along the trail the top-heavy load was held down by men at the end of long ropes.

The railway station of Carter on the Union Pacific, which was built years later, was named in honor of Judge Carter, the progressive ranchman who introduced the threshing machine in the far West.—H. F. G.

THE VANISHING SPOOR

By L. PATRICK GREENE
Author of "Three Thousand Acres."

Two troopers came back scared; the third came back to die. Then Trooper Stevens went to investigate this mystery which baffled the Rhodesian frontier authorities and threatened the whole territory with the dread cattle-fever

IT WAS not exactly a polite song which Jim Stevens sang as he rode up the dusty, deserted street leading to the Mounted Police camp; to be quite truthful, it was a ribald song, but it gave no more offense than a revival hymn, for though the words were questionable, the tune had merit, and Stevens could make a curse sound like a blessing.

As he rode Stevens closely scrutinized every house and the many hotels typical of the mushroom settlements of South Africa, as if searching for something, or someone. He was.

This was his first taste of civilization for twelve months, and during that long year out on the veld he had made a vow, begotten of loneliness, which he was now seeking to fulfill.

There was nothing about Stevens's personal appearance to indicate that he was just returning from a long and dangerous patrol; nothing to show that he had known all the privations—hunger, thirst, sickness—the veld in its sterner moments has to offer; nothing to show that he had been wounded and had, unaided, quelled an incipient rebellion, his only weapon an extraordinary knowledge of the black man's psychology; and there was certainly nothing to show that for a whole year he had not seen a white man or woman.

His horse was in good condition and free from sweat marks, though they had traveled far that day and the thermometer registered 116 degrees in the shade. His face was clean-shaven; his eyes clear and sparkling; his tunic was spotless, the buttons and insignia on it shining like gold. His boots were polished, his horse's hoofs blackened. A man specially turned out for inspection could not have presented a more immaculate appearance than Stevens.

As he passed one house he carefully turned his head in the opposite direction and so did not see the sour-visaged woman who shouted an invitation to, "Dismount, trooper, and have a cup of tea."

Neither did he appear to hear her. His attention at that moment was centered on his horse, which, for some obscure reason, took it into its head to rear and plunge madly.

"I played safe," Stevens chuckled, as if in answer to an accusing conscience. He had ridden well past the house and his horse was quite docile. "I didn't see her."

As he neared the Royal Hotel, Aggie, the barmaid, came out on the *stoep* and Stevens, reining in suddenly, jumped off his horse, clambered up the rickerty porch steps and planted a smacking kiss on Aggie's cheek.

The first *smack* was echoed by a second delivered by Aggie's none-too-soft hand, and Stevens ruefully rubbing his cheek ran back to his horse, vaulted into the saddle and rode swiftly away.

His vow was a thing of the past; he had kissed the first white woman he saw.

"The smart Aleck," Aggie said thoughtfully.

"Smart Aleck, indeed!" Some one exclaimed breathlessly. "That's too mild a term. He's an insolent cad——"

Aggie turned with a start to face the girl who had come out of the hotel in time to see the kiss, her back-of-the-hand retort and Stevens's swift retreat.

"Ow!" Aggie replied good-naturedly. "You don't want to be callin' 'im names, Miss Courtland, dearie, 'E's a nice boy. Just hoff patrol, I suppose, hand Gawd knows them perlice fellers don't get much fun. You know 'ow it is on your pa's ranch; you must get lonely not seeing any blokes from one week's end to another."

The other tossed her head disdainfully; her dark eyes flashed.

"At least, Aggie," she said with a show of irritation, "I don't kiss the first man I see when I come to town! I'd report him to his captain, if I were you, Aggie. He needs to be taught a lesson."

Aggie's blue eyes opened wide in childish astonishment.

"Why—what's a kiss, dearie, from such as 'im?" She gazed reflectively at the cloud of dust which marked Stevens's progress. "I wish now I 'adn't been so 'asty-like. Perhaps 'e'd 'ave kissed me again."

The other laughed softly.

"Oh you're hopeless, Aggie."

"At least I can look after meself. Kisses from a chap like Stevens don't do no woman any 'arm. He's clean. Now, hif it was your neighbor, 'Butcher' Kennedy, that 'ud be a different matter. But I can take care o' meself, an Butch knows hit. 'E tried to get familar-like, last time 'e was in town.

"'Give hus a kiss, old dear,' 'e says.

"And hi says, 'Yus, I will—wiv this.' Hand I 'olds a tumbler in me 'and w'ich knocks the top of hit off against the counter. Then I 'olds hit up, all jagged it was, an' says, 'If yer comes a step nearer I'll bash yer in the mug wiv this.'

"He stayed right where 'e was. I tell yer, dearie, if yer hever see a man wiv a round scar on 'is face about the size of a tumbler top, you just ask 'im wot barmaid kissed 'im."

"You're joking, Aggie—about Mr. Kennedy. He's rough, but a good sort. He's helped dad a lot with the cattle."

"'E may be a good sort—then again 'e may not. An' 'e's not your sort, Miss Courtland, dearie. Wh'at 'ave yer got yer riding togs on for? Going back 'ome today?"

The girl sighed.

"Yes," she said. "Dad's finished his business and he's in too bad a humor to stay longer for a little fun."

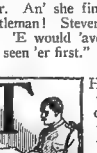
As she spoke a gray-haired, walrus-mustached man of portly build led two horses up to the *stoep*.

"All right Grace," he said gruffly in the tone of a man accustomed to instant and unquestioning obedience. "Let's start."

"Good-by, Aggie," Grace whispered hurriedly. "Dad's still in a temper. I suppose the cattle restrictions are still on. See you next month, perhaps."

She ran lightly down the steps and mounted; and the two cantered slowly down the street. At a bend in the road she turned and waved to Aggie.

"Gawd!" exclaimed the barmaid. "Wot a 'ell of a life, an' 'er so pretty, too. No women-folk to talk to—honly 'er grouchy old man. She's got nufink—only books an' the bloomin' veld. This—" she made a gesture embracing the hotel and the scattered township—"is bad enough. It ain't like Lunnon, but at least there's the boys from the perlice camp, hand they're good sorts—some of 'em, at least. Pore dear. An' she finks Butch Kennedy's a gentleman! Stevens ought to 'ave kissed 'er. 'E would 'ave done, I'm finking, if 'e'd seen 'er first."



"THAT'S a good piece of work," Captain Murray of the Rhodesian Mounted exclaimed as Stevens concluded his report. Stevens flushed. The "Old Man" was not in the habit of paying compliments.

"And I think—I'm not promising, mind you," the captain continued, "it will mean a commission for you."

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me—you've earned it. Sit down. Have a cigar?"

For a few minutes the men smoked in silence.

"Heard anything about the plague scare?" the captain asked abruptly.

"No, sir."

"Um. You came from the north. The

trouble's over in the Tati Concessions; they've got it bad."

"Then the cattle-guard is out?"

The captain nodded.

"You must be short-handed, sir?"

"Damned short. So you'll understand why I have to send you out on duty again—at once."

Stevens's face fell. He had looked forward to a week or so of loafing about the camp.

"A long trip, sir?"

"Until you've cleared up a little mystery. You know the Mphoengs District?"

"I've heard of it, of course, sir. I've never been there on patrol."

"Ha!" The captain seemed pleased. "All the better. The chances are that no one knows you up that way. We've been obliged to stop the movement of cattle from the Tati into our territory. With one or two exceptions we've had the cooperation of the farmers in that district; not that there are many of them or that their cooperation is a willing one. The thing we're up against is this; someone's running cattle across the river from the fever infested region. That's why I want you to go up to Mphoengs. That cattle-running must be stopped. It's a ticklish job and will probably call for strict measures—but it must be stopped!"

Stevens nodded gravely. He had been only a boy in his teens when the Matabele had last gone on the war-path, but he remembered vividly some of the bloody details of that rebellion, which had been preceded by a devastating outbreak of the East Coast Fever. Cattle had died by thousands, tens of thousands, and the natives had blamed the plague upon the white men. That could easily happen again if proper precautions were not taken.

"Courtland, one of the ranchers up there, was in to see me today," continued the captain. "He insisted that the restrictions be lifted; got quite ugly when I refused. You'll find him difficult to handle. His parting shot was, 'If the natives won't dip their cattle, I'm damned if I will!'"

"Sounds as if he had grounds for complaint there at any rate, sir."

"That's just the trouble. The Native Department is afraid to assert itself and you'll have to handle the natives with kid gloves. Old Mphoengs won't see that the dipping has been ordered for his own benefit, to kill the ticks and save his cattle from the fever. If he won't dip voluntarily, we can't make him. The Department's afraid to make an issue of it."

"But suppose their beasts get the fever?"

The captain was silent while he carefully clipped off the end of another cigar.

"If you discover one beast in anyone's herd sickening with the plague you'll act as instructed in the regulations," he said decisively. "Shoot the whole herd and burn the carcasses. I don't care if the cattle belong to a white man or black; no half-measures, Stevens, in a case like that."

"All right, sir. But you said something about a mystery. All I have to do is enforce the cattle regulations."

The captain grinned grimly.

"You'll find that'll keep you busy. There's someone running cattle up there who's too smart for the three troopers who've been up there already—and failed. Two of the three got the wind up them, afraid of the natives, and asked to be transferred. They were new men, didn't know the country or the natives, so I shifted them to another post. The third came down today from Mphoengs with a bad attack of blackwater. All I've been able to get from him is that on four occasions he followed the spoor of cattle which had been run across the river to a certain spot—and then the spoor vanished. The other two chaps had also talked about the 'vanishing spoor', but I thought that was all wind. Do I make myself clear?"

"You mean," said Stevens slowly, "that they came upon the spoor of cattle, which had evidently been run across the river, and followed it, expecting, of course, it would lead them to the ranch of the man who was running them, and then——"

"Then it doesn't go anywhere; it just vanishes," the captain finished.

"I see. It ought to be a good business, sir, running cattle. You can buy 'em at four pounds a head over there, I believe?"

"Yes. And sell 'em on this side for ten."

"Do you suspect anyone?"

"Yes; but I'm not going to tell you. I want you to go up there suspecting no one. Work it all out yourself. We've got to have more than suspicion before we can make a move. Get the evidence, Stevens; then we can act."

Stevens nodded agreement.

"Very good, sir. Did you tell this Courtland you were going to send me up there?"

"I told him that I'd only one man in camp and that he wouldn't be much good because he'd only been in the country five or six months; didn't know then you'd be back today. Somehow, I fancied Court-

land was relieved. He asked specially if the man could speak the vernacular."

"Well, I can't sir. Don't know anything about the country. Turn me around once on the veld and I'm lost."

The captain laughed understandingly.

"When will you start, Stevens?"

"Tonight, sir. It's a four-day trek, isn't it?"

"Yes. But you ought to make it in three. There's plenty of provisions at the post, and ten native police. Can't spare you any more."

"That ought to be enough, sir. I'll turn in and have a nap now."

STEVENS' arrival at Mphoengs' kraal was far from an impressive one. Only the maidens of the kraal, on their way to the river to get the morning's supply of water, saw him and to them he was a source of much merriment. Several of them laughed so heartily that they were forced to put up their hands to steady the huge calabashes which they carried on their heads.

Stevens stared at them, a puzzled look on his face, as if not quite sure whether he was being laughed at or not. He pulled his horse to a walk and frowned at them; sitting uneasily in the saddle, constantly shifting, squirming, looking to the right and the left as if endeavoring to silence their tittering by his ferocious scowls.

But this only made them laugh still louder and, pulling his helmet over his eyes, he spurred his horse and galloped after his pack mule which had trotted on in the direction of the police huts. Once he lost his stirrups and was nearly unseated.

At the police huts Stevens clumsily dismounted, then caught his mule.

"Boy! Oh, boy!" he called loudly.

There was no response save a stealthy rustling in a near-by hut. He turned swiftly. The rustling ceased; there was no one to be seen. He looked about him uneasily.

"Oh, boy!" he called again. *"Figa lapa.* Come here and take *lo* horse-e and *lo bongola."*

Still no response. Grumblingly, he took the pack off the mule himself.

When he had finished a native came out of one of the huts and stood in the doorway, stretching himself lazily.

Stevens sighed loudly with relief.

"Hi, boy!"

The police boy eyed him incuriously.

"Hi boy! Figa lapa!"

The native looked about him as if expecting to see someone else whom the white man must be addressing. Finally he grinned sheepishly and, coming forward reluctantly, took charge of Steven's horse and mule.

"About time you came," Stevens said indignantly. "You're a lazy devil. I've a good mind to sjambok you—do you hear?" He repeated his threat in a loud voice, shouting, as some men do when addressing foreigners, believing that noise will interpret their words. "I'll sjambok you, do you hear?"

The native grinned impudently.

"I hear, sar," he said in a soft, lisping voice. "Me speak good Ingleesh. Me damned Christian boy, went to mission school."

"Oh, you did, did you?" Stevens' tone was one of great friendliness. "That's fine. You shall be my cook boy and interpreter. That'll mean extra pay for you. What's your name?"

"Paul Santie, sar. You live over there." He pointed to three large huts set somewhat apart from the native police quarters. "You go there now. I take horse and mule and put them in stable. By an' by, I come and get you skoff."

Stevens nodded enthusiastically and limped off to his huts, dragging his packsaddle on the ground behind him, walking as one who is very weary.

Paul watched him enter one of the huts and then, a sneering smile on his face, lead the animals away. Coming to the stable huts, he did not take the trouble to give the animals a rub-down or water them, but adjusted hobbles and turned them loose to graze.

That done he went to a dirty, much littered lean-to which served as a kitchen, made coffee in a dirty billy, warmed up an unappetizing mess of mealie-meal and carried it into the skoff hut.

STEVENS was there, waiting, having himself set the table with the chipped cup and plate he had discovered in a tiny cupboard.

He looked disgustedly at the food Paul set before him.

"Is that all there is?" he asked peevishly.

"That's all," Paul answered with a snicker. "Bye an' bye, maybe you get more

food in tins sent here, maybe you buy eggs, goats and milk from the niggers at the kraal—then will be plenty good food."

Stevens sipped the muddy coffee thoughtfully.

"Where are the other native police?" he said suddenly.

"All gone, sar." Paul sat down in the only other chair the hut contained, watching Stevens closely as he did so. "They are all out on patrol."

Stevens nodded.

"This is one damn bad place, sar," Paul continued glibly. "Niggers at Mphoengs's make much trouble. They break down the fence, they say they will water their cattle when they want to. They will not wait for the gate to be opened in the morning and in the evening. They beat the police at the gate, sar, if he won't open when they say. They won't dip their cattle, sar. *Au-a!* They are bad men. They will kill you if you try to make them dip their cattle. They say that the sickness has come to the cattle across the river because the people there have offended the spirits. They do not believe what we know to be true: that the sickness is carried by the 'tick-that-is-all-belly.' They are fools! But fools can kill!"

Paul rolled his eyes dramatically and Stevens drummed a nervous tatoo on the grease-spattered table.

"This is a hell of a place to send a new man," he muttered, but not so softly that Paul did not hear him.

"Yes, sar," the native assented quickly. "Bad place. But me, Paul Santie, will take care of you. You do what I say do—then all right, eh?"

"All right," Stevens agreed. Then abruptly, "You know all about this place, don't you?"

"Know everything, sar."

"Then you know where there's a map of the district?"

"Yes, sar," Paul nodded agreement. "You come to office hut. I show you."

He led the way into the office hut.

Stevens slumped down into a dilapidated, canvas-back chair and took off his cloth puttees while Paul searched through a pile of dusty papers.

"Here it is," Paul said triumphantly, after a long search which filled the huts with a cloud of choking dust.

In his hand he waved a crumpled and torn blueprint which he spread out on the rickety deal table.

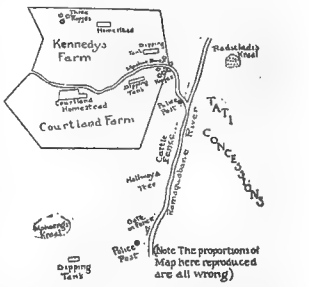
Stevens looked at it, dull-eyed, turned it this way and that.

"What's it all about?" he asked. "This, I suppose is the river; and here's another river. But what's this?" He pointed to a dotted line which ran parallel with the Ramaquabane River.

"That's the cattle-fence, sar. That's to stop cattle from coming across from Tati, sar. All cattle we find between the fence and the river, on this side, sar, we kill."

"Yes," Stevens interrupted impatiently. "I know that—and burn 'em hides and all. They told me that at headquarters. But go on, seeing that you know so much about it."

Paul grinned and, with the eagerness of a spoiled child showing off in school, continued his interpretation of the map, which had evidently been drawn by an unskilled hand. No names had been written in.



"Yes, sar. I know all about this; it was made by Mr. Dixon. He was here before you; he went away very sick—perhaps he die. We are here, close to Mphoengs' kraal. Here is the gate in the fence; we open it twice a day so that Mphoengs' cattle can get to water. Here is the dipping tank; we do not use it because Mphoengs will not. That is Baas Courtland's farm; he has a dipping tank, but he will not use it. Baas Courtland is bad man. Maybe he run cattle from Radiciadi's kraal; he make much trouble. Missy Courtland—" Paul leered at Stevens—"she is very nice. That's Mr. Kennedy's farm. He good man. He dips his cattle in his tank. He helps police boys. He——"

"What are these?" Stevens asked sleepily, pointing to the upper right hand corner of the map.

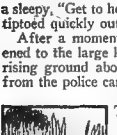
"They are hills on Mr. Kennedy's farm," Paul said after a moment's hesitation. Bad

place there. Evil spirits live there. Anybody go there, he die. Course only damn fool niggers believe that. This is another river, named Mpakwe. Baas Courtland and Mr. Kennedy water their cattle there. This is police post at Mpakwe. Every day police boys patrol fence. Two go north and meet boys from next post; two go south and meet two boys from Mpakwe at halfway tree. It is bad country, sar. Lions and——"

Paul's voice droned on and on, to be interrupted at length by Stevens' loud snore.

The native shook him, was greeted with a sleepy, "Get to heli out of here," and then tiptoed quickly out of the hut.

After a moment's hesitation Paul hastened to the large kraal which was built on rising ground about three hundred yards from the police camp.



AT the gate in the pole stockade which encircled the kraal he was hailed by four natives wearing the uniform of the police. They were clear-eyed; the brass buttons and insignia of their tunics were covered with verdigris.

"Come here," said one, "and tell us about the new white man."

"If you know he is here, what need for me to talk," Paul said in disappointed tones.

"*Au-a!* You have more to tell us. All we know is what the maidens saw: a white man who is undoubtedly a fool. They said he was dirty and looked as if he were about to cry like a woman when they laughed at him. But—*au-a!*—who shall believe the eyes of a woman?"

"All they said is true. He came to the huts and called. I looked from my hut but he did not see me. He called again——"

"In our tongue?" one inquired.

"No, fool. If he had I should have gone to him at the first call. When no one answered he took the pack off his mule, looking about him as if afraid of death. Then I came out of my hut and stood so that he could not see me. He called again, and I made play that I did not understand. Then, when I went to him, he threatened to beat me until I told him I could speak Engleesh. So he made me his servant—at great pay. Aye, I will make known his speech to you dogs and I will cook his food."

"You, a cook boy," a tall, powerfully built police boy chuckled. "He will dib of your cooking."

"Maybe," Paul said complacently. "But do you wish to hear the end?"

"Aye. Go on," chorused the three others, looking angrily at the interrupter. "Kawiti is as the wind; no one can stop him from blowing."

"Then," continued Paul with a smirk, "I took the horse and the mule, leaving him to take the pack saddle. This he did, himself carrying it to the hut. Presently I made him coffee and cooked food left from our last night's meal. I carried it to him, and while he ate I sat in a chair beside him."

He looked them triumphantly and was rewarded with an amazed, "*Au-a!* And he said nothing?"

"Nothing in the way of rebuke. I told him this was an evil place, that you were beaten by Mphoengs' people, that they broke down the fence. *Au-a!* I told him many things. Most of them lies. But true and false he believed all without question. While I was still talking, he fell asleep, snoring like a pig."

"That I can well believe," Kawiti said slowly. "Your voice is very wearying. It is like the chatter of your ape brothers."

The others laughed and Paul's eyes narrowed, but he dared not answer Kawiti wrathfully.

"At least, Kawiti," he said humbly, "it should not be forgotten that by talking I have saved you from great punishment. What if I had told him that you have spent the last three days and nights at a beer drink?"

"If he is the fool you say he is, what harm?" Kawiti rose to his feet. "I go now to see for myself. But first I will get clean. I trust no man's wisdom but my own. White men, some white men, have a cunning beyond our understanding. For my part I hold all white men to be possessed of great wisdom—until they prove themselves to be fools. And of that proof d trust no man's judgment but my own."

He walked swiftly in the direction of the police huts, followed at a more leisurely gait by the other three.

Paul watched them for a minute, then shrugged his shoulders and entered the kraal.

Seated in the shade of the chief's hut was Mphoengs, his eyes half-closed, his mouth agape, his hands clasped loosely across his enormous stomach.

Beside him stood a white man of gigan-

tic build. His eyes were close-set and overhung by black, bushy eyebrows. His thin nose curved like a hawk's beak; a straggling, drooping mustache completely hid his mouth.

Seeing Paul the white man threw an empty whisky bottle at him.

"You've kept me waiting, dog," he said harshly.

"Yes, sar, Mr. Kennedy," Paul said hurriedly, nimbly dodging the bottle, watching fearfully to see that no other missile left the white man's hand. "But I have much to tell."

IF during the next few days Stevens' commanding officer could have seen him, it is possible that he would have reconsidered his opinion of Stevens' fitness for a commission.

He was dirty; at least he did not shave and his uniform was in an even more disgraceful condition than the most disreputable of the police boys. He was lazy; never rising until the sun was high above the horizon.

Then all he did was to wander aimlessly about the camp, bullying the police boys who crossed his path—shouting at them in a mixture of profane English and irrelevant, wrongly pronounced native words, threatening to beat them. Then his demeanor would suddenly change and he would try to make friends with them, patting them on the back, laughing self-consciously when they shrank from his familiarities.

Paul he kept by his side continually, questioning him about the district and the attitude of the natives, quailing at the tales of bloodshed which Paul related with great gusto.

Not once did he patrol the fence, as was his duty—though once he had his horse saddled, mounted, prepared to do just that.

"I'm going to ride to the Mpakwe River Post," he announced loudly. "I shall go to see Mr. Courtland and Mr. Kennedy."

But he only rode a few hundred yards from camp, then turned and galloped back at full speed.

"There was a lion," he gasped in answer to Paul's look of inquiry. Then he added, with a show of dignity, as if remembering that a white man must not show fear before a native. "I decided not to go today. It's—it's too damned hot."

Paul, affecting to believe, agreed, then escaped to tell the tale of a white man frightened by the wind blowing in the bush.

There was one thing Stevens did do, and that was witness the watering of Mphoengs' cattle when the gate in the fence was opened in the morning and again in the evening.

At such times he would take up his position on a large rock overlooking the pool where the beasts were watered; it was in the dry season and the river was very low, stretches of its sandy bed showing here and there. Occasionally he would climb down from his vantage point and mingle with the crowd of excited herders, keeping his hand very ostensibly on the butt of his revolver.

He listened to their conversation while they, confident that he could not understand them, talked freely. Yet they spoke only of maidens to be won, of beer drinks past and yet to come.

Once the arguments of rival cattle-owners over the respective merits of their beasts waged hot, threatening to turn into a free-for-all fight. Other natives, not at first implicated, quickly took sides. They surged about Stevens who stood bewildered midway between the opposing factions.

A warrior on the outskirts of the milling crowd threw a handful of mud, aimed at the leader of one of the opposing forces, a man who was standing near Stevens. The white man must have seen the filth hurtling through the air, yet he deliberately stepped in front of it. It hit him full in the chest and splattered all over his tunic and face.

In that moment all thought of fight left the natives as they joined in laughing at the sorry plight of Stevens, jeering at him, doubling up with mirth as he ran, bellowing with anger, to his hut.

Early the next day Stevens, after cleaning up his equipment somewhat, had his horse saddled and rode along the fence in the direction of the Mpakwe River Post.

After about a three-hour ride he came to a break in the fence. Examining it with woeful expression were two native police boys belonging to the Mpakwe post. They were in lazy argument as to which one should return to the post for the tools necessary to repair the break.

Dumbly they stared at Stevens as he showered questions on them in English. Then, when he apparently had exhausted his patience in endeavoring to make them understand, they burst into a torrent of speech which seemed to be just as meaningless to him. Finally they pointed to

the ground where, faintly marked on the hard soil, was the spoor of two head of cattle.

Stevens had read the meaning of the spoor and the broken fence in the first moment he had ridden up to the break. Still, he decided to play ignorance for a while longer, basing his course on the African proverb which runs something to the effect that "to the blind, much is shown; in the presence of the deaf, tongues wag freely."

By signs and the use of the few native words a white man in South Africa soon adds to his vocabulary, Stevens made plain to the police boys that one should stay to watch the gap in the fence, while the other went with him, seeking the cattle which had made the spoor.

This task was soon accomplished for, barely two hundred yards from the break, they came up to two old cows lying down in the shade of a large tree, peacefully chewing the cud.

For a moment Stevens hesitated, genuinely undecided as to what course to follow. Then remembering the uncompromisingly strict regulations and realizing that the beasts might conceivably have crossed the river and come in contact with diseased cattle in the Tati country, he drew his revolver and shot them.

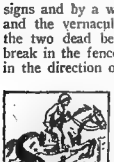
"Au-a, baba!" exclaimed the police boy, and his eyes were dilated with terror. "They were Baas Courtland's cows; he will beat us. It was a foolish deed to kill them."

Stevens affected to understand only one word of this.

"Courtland!" he exclaimed. "Baas Courtland. Where does he live. *Oupie* his kraal? Where does he live?"

The native pointed to a thin column of smoke which rose above the bush about two miles away.

Stevens nodded. Then, indicating by signs and by a weird mixture of English and the vernacular, he gave orders that the two dead beasts be burned and the break in the fence mended. Fast he rode in the direction of the pillar of smoke.



SOON he came to a stout wire fence which encircled the Courtland homestead and not bothering to look for the gate, put his horse to it and jumped it, handling his mount as prettily as a steeplechase jockey. When, some ten minutes later, he came to a well-made dirt road, he slumped forward and there was room for a bottle to pass between each knee and the saddle. Jimmy, the regimental sergeant major, would have said that he "rode like a damned tailor, sir; like a sack of oats tied in the middle."

Nevertheless, though conscious of the mocking smiles which hovered about the lips of the three people who were sitting on the *stoep* of the large bungalow, Stevens could smile too, knowing that he was making an exhibition of himself. At the same time, seeing the girl, he regretted that he had not shaved.

"I'm the new trooper in charge at Mphoengs," he announced bashfully, and awkwardly dismounted.

"Well, what about it?" the walrus-mustached man growled. "I've got no room for you here. I was just telling Butch," he indicated the tall, powerfully-built man, "that if you had the nerve to come here I'd sjambok you off the place."

The girl turned to her father, a look of reproof on her face.

"Father," she began, but with an impatient snort he rose hurriedly and went into the house.

"Come in, Butch," he shouted, and the big man followed, first stooping over to pat the girl's hand, winking at Stevens as he did so.

Left alone with the girl, Stevens shuffled his feet, raising a miniature cloud of red dust.

Then he looked up, their eyes met and they both burst into peals of laughter.

Stevens was the first to sober.

"I'm not popular with your father, am I, Miss Courtland? My name's Stevens."

She inclined her head, instantly as grave as he.

"No. You're not. Father hates all policemen. It's silly of him—it's worse than silly; it's unjust. But, the poor old dear, he's had a lot of trouble—still has. His cattle business will be ruined if the regulations are in force much longer. He used to buy a lot over the river, you know. Now he can't buy and they're finding new markets."

Stevens nodded sympathetically. Inwardly he was calling himself a fool for having passed himself off as a clodhopper. Why hadn't he ridden up to the homestead as he knew how to ride? Why hadn't he lived up to his reputation of being the cleanest man on the force? Why hadn't he shaved? He glanced up at her, noting the shimmer of her hair, golden, gleaming

with lights of burnished bronze; noting the deep violet-blue of her eyes, fringed with long, silky lashes and—why, she was beautiful!

"Won't you come up and sit down?" the girl continued.

"Thanks! I'll sit here if you don't mind."

He sat down on the lowest step of the *stoep*.

"Still here, eh?" Courtland shouted as he and Butch Kennedy came out of the house a few minutes later.

"Yes, sir. I had something very important to say to you."

A native led Kennedy's horse up to the house.

"Good-by, Butch," Courtland said warmly. "Come again soon."

"I will, Courtland. Don't use the trooper here too hard. He's only doing his duty."

Kennedy vaulted into the saddle with an agility surprizing in a man of his size, and waved his hand in farewell to the girl and Courtland.

"Come and see me soon, Trooper!" he shouted. Aiming a playful blow—it would have been a vicious one had it landed—at the native who was holding the horse, he jammed his spurs home and galloped swiftly away.

"Sometimes I think he's a brute," the girl exclaimed.

"No, Grace," Courtland said hastily. "He means well. Trouble with Butch is, he doesn't know his own strength and he's as impetuous as a schoolboy. Well, Trooper," Courtland turned to Stevens, "so you've something important to say to me, eh? I suppose you've come to ask me if I'll dip my cattle?"

"That's one reason, sir," Stevens said.

"Reason enough," Courtland snorted. "So before we go any further, young man, let me tell you that as long as Mphoengs' cattle are not dipped, I'm not going to dip mine. Why should I?"

"It's for your own good," Stevens pointed out mildly. "The dip solution kills the ticks, and the ticks——"

"Bosh! I've heard all about that a hundred times. Bosh! You police chaps and your damned restrictions have caused me trouble enough. Why——"

He was about to launch into an impassioned recital of his grievances when Stevens interrupted.

"And you'll dip your cattle if the natives dip theirs?" he asked. "Is that a bargain?"

Courtland looked at him for a few moments in wide-eyed astonishment, then laughed boisterously.

"You don't mean to tell me," he gasped, "that you think you can make that old heathen come to heel. Why, man, Mphoengs can twist you round his little finger. The first two men your captain sent up here were fools, yes, but they weren't such a fool as you are. They couldn't do it. The last man up here had brains; he could talk the native talk better than you can talk English. And he couldn't do it. Old Mphoengs liked him at that. Perhaps he'd have worked the trick if he hadn't come down sick. But *you!*" He laughed shortly. "We've heard of you. You don't know the nigger talk or anything about 'em. They laugh at you and—oh, bah!"

"But if Mphoengs will dip, you will," Stevens insisted, and the girl looked at him with renewed interest.

"Damn it—yes," Courtland bellowed.

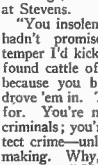
"Good. Now there's one other thing I want to tell you before I go."

"Well, out with it."

"I found the fence broken down there," he nodded in the general direction of the break, "and two of your beasts had passed through. I—the regulations are very strict, sir—I had to shoot them."

Courtland's face went purple, then white with rage, and he pointed a shaking finger at Stevens.

"You insolent pup," he shouted. "If I hadn't promised Kennedy to keep my temper I'd kick you off my farm. If you found cattle of mine inside the fence it's because you broke the fence down and drove 'em in. That's all you curs are good for. You're not clever enough to catch criminals; you're not clever enough to detect crime—unless it's crime of your own making. Why, I could run cattle across the river—" He stopped abruptly. "Oh, get out of here and don't let me see you again. Do you hear? Mount and get."



STEVENS looked at the girl, but her face was averted; then, shrugging his shoulders, he mounted and rode slowly away, following the winding road Kennedy had taken. Once he looked back. Old Courtland had gone back into the house, but the girl was still standing on the *stoep*.

Stevens was seized by an irresistible impulse to wave to her—and did. She waved

back to him; at least it pleased him to think that she did. Certainly she raised her hand to her shoulder and in it fluttered a white handkerchief.

At the gate in the Courtland fence, Stevens found the man Kennedy waiting for him.

"I wanted to talk to you about old Courtland," Kennedy said abruptly. "He's a queer old bird, as perhaps you've noticed."

"I noticed that all right," Stevens replied bitterly. "He ordered me off his place as if I were a dog. Blast him!"

Kennedy nodded in sympathetic understanding.

"I know. And his daughter's such a winner. I feel sorry for her."

Kennedy watched Stevens closely.

"Oh, I don't know," Stevens answered slowly. "She's as uppish as he is. Got more airs than a duchess."

"She's not really that way. She was a little embarrassed today, perhaps. You see, just before you arrived we were trying to settle the day for our wedding." Stevens looked at him quickly. "Yes," Kennedy went on, "it's to be next month. So, you see, I've every right to be interested in Courtland's affairs."

"Naturally," Stevens murmured.

"When he's all right the old man's one of the best. When he ain't, he's a devil. You know, I think he's a bit touched." Kennedy tapped his forehead. "He lost his wife in the Rebellion of '96, and the plague killed off every head of cattle he owned. Absolutely ruined him. He's never seemed just right since then."

"Small wonder. Enough to make any man go balmy."

"You see the point, Trooper. Of course, this cattle plague scare is bringing it all back to him. Ever since his wife died, old Courtland's had the idea fixed in his mind that the government's got a grudge against him and is trying to ruin him. That's why he's against every government regulation; that's why he hates the police. I've been trying to persuade him to dip his cattle ever since this scare started, but he won't. And listen," Kennedy lowered his voice, "I believe it's old Courtland that's tipping the natives off not to dip. More than once I've suspected that he breaks down the cattle fence just out of sheer spite. Yah! He's a queer bird."

"I killed two of his cows today," Stevens said mournfully. "They were inside the fence."

Kennedy whistled shrilly.

"That's what he meant when he said that he would give the police some little things to do, like killing a few head of aged cows. Just as long as you had something to report, he said, you wouldn't bother to look for big stuff. You know, I believe the old devil wouldn't be above running cattle across the river. He's often hinted at some mysterious scheme he's got, but I could never get him to talk; not even when I offered to go into partnership with him. You may think it's funny me telling you all this about my future wife's father, but it's because we—me and you—have got to save the old fool from himself. See?"

"Yes," assented Stevens. "I see."

"Well, that's a load off my chest. How about coming over to my place for skoff? I've got a good brand of *dop* too. Not of this rot-gut stuff."

"No, thanks." Stevens said hesitatingly. "I want to get back tonight. Tomorrow I'm going to see if I can't get old Mphoengs to dip his cattle."

Kennedy's eyes contracted to pin-points.

"You are, are you?" He seemed to be taking Stevens's measure, checking the reports of the natives with his own observation. "That's fine, but you won't be able to get anywhere without being able to talk the lingo."

"I've got a good interpreter, Paul Santie."

"You can't trust that liar, Trooper," Kennedy warned quickly. "Look here, I'll tell you what. You see if you can't arrange for all Mphoengs' people to be at the dipping tank tomorrow and I'll come over and interpret for you."

"That's mighty decent of you. I——"

"Don't mention it. All I ask is that you work with me to keep old Courtland from getting himself in trouble."

"I'll do anything," Stevens said hesitatingly, "anything I can, of course. But, suppose I catch him running cattle, then I'd have to shoot all his beasts. It says so in the regulations."

"Of course," Kennedy agreed heartily. "I'd be the first to insist on you doing it. I've got my own stock to think of. I'm running enough risk as it is, with him not dipping his cattle. But we'll get round old Mphoengs tomorrow; after that we'll see that old Courtland comes to heel. All I ask you to do is to keep me in touch with your plans. If you suspect anything, or get any evidence against Courtland, let me know. I'll do the same for you. Together, maybe we can avoid getting into a mess. That's good sense, isn't it?"

"Yes," Stevens assented enthusiastically.

"Fine. Well," Kennedy turned his horse, "I'll see you tomorrow. Good-by."

He spurred his horse, laughing at the beast's maddened plunge, and rode swiftly away.

STEVENS looked after Kennedy until he vanished from sight, and then rode slowly to the break in the fence. He discovered to his great satisfaction that the police boys had made good progress in repairing the fence. Several native laborers from the Courtland farm impressed by the police boys for the task, were gathering wood and throwing it on the fire which was consuming the two cows he had shot.

Stevens stayed around for a little while, listening to their chatter, his ears open for information that would be useful to him in enforcing the cattle regulations, but chiefly concerned in assuring himself that the dead cows were being burned thoroughly, hides and all.

Satisfied at last on this point, he rode on, heading for the police camp at Mphoengs.

As he rode he considered the knowledge he had gained, so far, and was forced to acknowledge that his pose of laziness, ignorance and inefficiency had gained him nothing. Indeed, he had handicapped himself by the way in which he had conducted himself before the natives and he did not altogether relish the thought of the morrow's task.

Having by his actions failed to win the respect and loyalty of the native police, having made himself a laughing stock before Mphoengs' people, he could hardly expect them to listen to his orders with good grace—much less obey them.

Of one thing he was sure: Paul Santie was not to be trusted. He had known that from the moment he had seen the native, and his fingers itched to make the man suffer for his many impertinences. He knew that he dared not use Paul to interpret for him on the morrow, and he would be faced with the necessity of throwing off his pose and talking to the natives in the vernacular. He did not count too much on Kennedy's help.

Kennedy! The name brought up other thoughts. Somehow he did not trust the man; yet Kennedy had been helpful, his offer to interpret had sounded sincere, his attitude toward Courtland was understandable. On the face of it, there was nothing against Kennedy except his undoubted brutality, but brutality alone is not sufficient cause to distrust a man's motives.

Courtland, on the other hand, was, to say the least, eccentric. If anyone was running cattle, Courtland was the logical one to suspect. If Courtland were guilty, Stevens reasoned, his daughter would surely know of it. She was no coddled miss of civilization. She, the daughter of a pioneer, was herself a pioneer. She probably knew as much about her father's business as Courtland himself. Stevens refused to believe that she would be party to so damnable a crime as running cattle from an infected district.

Miss Courtland . . . Grace . . . How well the name suited her . . . Grace . . . Miss Courtland and Kennedy . . . Mrs. Kennedy . . .

Stevens frowned, shrugged his shoulders in angry impatience and went off into another train of thought.

Strange that he had heard nothing of the mysterious vanishing spoor. Perhaps it only existed in the imaginations of his predecessors at the post. Otherwise, surely, he would have heard some talk of it, some vague allusion. Judging from the conversations he had heard, the district of Mphoengs was essentially law-abiding.

The only difficulty he had to face was Courtland's and Mphoengs' refusal to dip cattle. Tomorrow, he thought, banking on his knowledge of native psychology, that difficulty would be removed.

So engrossed was Stevens with his thoughts that he allowed his horse to choose its own slow gait. The setting of the sun and the quickly fading light roused him out of the reverie into which he had fallen. Tightening his reins, he brought his horse to a gallop, and so came to the police camp just as the last light of day left the western sky.

He dismounted and called for Paul. There was no answer. He called again and the native emerged, yawning, from his hut.

"Hurry—you!" Stevens said sharply.

Paul looked at him covertly, surprized at the new note of command in the white man's voice. He took the reins as Stevens dismounted and sullenly led the animal away.

"Is skoff ready?" Stevens called after him.

"Yes, sar. You go to the skoff hut and I'll bring it as soon as I've put horse in stable."

"Tell one of the police boys to take the horse. You bring skoff at once. I'm hungry."

"But, sar——"

"You do as I say," Stevens exclaimed in anger; then chuckling to himself, he went to his hut, washed and changed into clean clothes.

When he went to the skoff hut, ten minutes later, he found roast chicken and a dish of rice awaiting him. True, it was a native chicken, scrawny and tough as leather, but it was chicken and a great treat after the monotonous meals Paul had been serving.

Stevens ate heartily and drank freely of the kaffir beer which Paul ladled out of the large calabash which was standing in the corner of the hut.

While drinking, Kawiti came to the door of the hut and looked in, unobserved by the two men in the hut. Then, his shoulders shaking with poorly suppressed mirth, Kawiti vanished.

"That was good, Paul," Stevens said at length, eyeing the carcass of the chicken. "Didn't think you could cook so well. Where did the chicken come from?"

Paul grinned.

"It was one of Mphoengs', I think, sar. It and five others strayed into the camp. I am a Christian, sar, but I have not forgotten how to throw a knobkerry. Mphoengs will never again find six of his fowls. There is one—" He pointed to the remains of the bird on the table. "The others—" He rubbed his belly expressively. "The other police boys like chicken, too," he added.

Stevens frowned. Pulling a handful of silver coins from his pocket, he selected four and gave them to Paul.

"You go up to the kraal tonight, at once," he said, "and you tell Mphoengs about the fowls and give him that money. You understand?"

"Yes, sar."

Jingling the coins happily between his cupped hands, Paul turned to leave but halted at the sound of Stevens' next order.

"And you'll tell Mphoengs that tomorrow is the day on which the government says he must dip his cattle. Understand?"

"Yes, sar. Tomorrow is day government says Mphoengs must dip his cattle," Paul glibly repeated.

"And," continued Stevens, "I want Mphoengs and all his people at the dipping tank tomorrow when the sun's straight above. His people and his cattle must be there. Tell him that if he disobeys me I'll sjambok him and send him to *trunk*."

"You couldn't do that, sar," Paul exclaimed in real alarm. "That would make a hell bad mess, much trouble. Mphoengs would sjambok me if I told him things like that."

Stevens's hesitation seemed to be one of indecision.

"Sjambok you, too," Paul added.

Stevens shivered, then shouted blatantly, as if trying to hide fear by making a lot of noise. "You get to hell out of here. Tell Mphoengs what you like, but if he's not at the dipping tank tomorrow, I'll flay you alive."

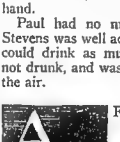
He rose threateningly from his chair, reeling as if the beer he had drunk had intoxicated him.

Paul left hurriedly. He could handle fool white men when they were sober, but his experiences had taught him it was well to steer clear of drunken white fools.

As if to bear out the wisdom of his retreat, a revolver shot broke the stillness of the night—another and then another.

Paul, who had decided that night was not the time to visit Mphoengs' kraal and had no intention of paying Mphoengs for the fowls, suddenly changed his mind, running swiftly to the kraal. He did not mean to risk being discovered in his hut by a drunken white man; specially when that white man, who had ordered him to be elsewhere, carried a revolver in his hand.

Paul had no means of knowing that Stevens was well accustomed to kaffir beer, could drink as much as any native, was not drunk, and was firing his revolver into the air.



AFTER Paul's departure Stevens went to his office hut and, lighting the small oil-lamp, got out the map of the district, he examined it closely.

A swarm of winged insects beat against the glass chimney of the lamp; fat red spiders ran up and down the walls with incredible speed; a small scorpion fell from the thatched roof of the hut on to the table.

With an impatient gesture Stevens swept it to the ground and crushed the venomous thing under his heel. Then he was conscious of some one in the doorway of the hut, watching him. He turned slowly. It was the big native police boy.

"What is it, Kawiti?" Stevens asked in English, a note of fear in his voice.

The native advanced a step into the room, squatted on his haunches and grinned.

"Get out, dog!" Stevens exclaimed wrathfully. *"Hamba, inja! Vootsac!"*

Kawiti laughed loudly; tears of mirth trickled down his face.

"It is good," he gasped in the vernacular. "Oh, the white man is clever. When he first came to us Paul Santie said he was a fool. But not Kawiti. Not so. I said, 'I will wait and see with my own eyes.' And I waited, and I saw. No, you are no fool, white man. You are very clever, because you have made all the people think you're a fool—everybody but Kawiti."

Stevens glared at him uncomprehendingly; then his jaw muscles twitched slightly, his lips trembled, a merry light danced in his eyes. Suddenly his face again assumed a mask-like expression.

"Vootsac!" he exclaimed. "Get out!"

"If the white man says, 'Get out,' this black one must obey. Yet it would be well, I think, if the white man listened to Kawiti. Also, there is this he should see."

From his tunic pocket he extracted a dirty, torn envelope and handed it to Stevens. It was an official envelope, addressed to Stevens in the handwriting of Captain Murray. The envelope had been opened—steamed open, Stevens judged—and clumsily sealed again.

Tearing it open Stevens read the brief letter it contained.

Dear Stevens:

> Other complications have arisen concerning affairs at Mphoengs. Brockford, your predecessor, the chap who came down with blackwater, is dead. Only it wasn't blackwater. The doctor, who had been suspicious all along, held a post mortem. Brockford was poisoned! Wonder is he lived so long. So be on your guard. If you need more men I'll manage to let you have them somehow.
>
> I have theories, but I'm not going to advance them. They'd only confuse you; they're probably wrong, anyway. But I will say this: it seems to me that whoever is running cattle up there is also guilty of poisoning Brockford. The other two men they managed to scare away, but Brockford wouldn't be scared and was beginning to find out things. So they poisoned him.
>
> Yours,
>
> Murray.

"Where did you get this?" Stevens asked in the vernacular looking steadily at Kawiti.

"Au-a!" breathed Kawiti happily. "From Paul Santie, *Inkosi*," he continued quickly. "And this is the tale of it. A runner from the next post brought it this morning after you had gone. Paul Santie took it and, first telling us that he was to make a charm, held it over the steam of a cooking-pot. So he opened it and looked at the speaking paper as the *inkosi* did. All this I saw and he did not know I saw. By and by he put it in his pocket. And I took it out of his pocket, *Inkosi*, when he passed me in the darkness just now. That is all, *Inkosi*."

"It was well done, Kawiti. How long have you been in the police?"

"Five years, *Inkosi*."

"What? And you still a private?"

Kawiti hung his head and grinned shamefacedly.

"I was a sergeant once, *Inkosi*—for a little while. But a black dog of a Mashona passed me the fighting word when much beer was in me. He broke under my hands like a rotten eggshell and I was a sergeant no longer."

"Ah! But there are no Mashonas here, Kawiti?"

"No, *Inkosi*." Kawiti looked up hopefully.

"Tchat! We will see. But how knew you that I was playing a part?"

Kawiti preened himself.

"I watched the *inkosi* as I said I would. Always I watched him and listened. At first I saw nothing; the *inkosi* played his part well. Then I saw how he listened to the men talking at the drinking-place. It came to me that he understood all that was being said. Truly, *Inkosi*, the eyes cannot lie. Sometimes, when you heard a jest well told, a laugh was in your eyes; sometimes, when filth was spoken concerning you, your eyes looked death. Aye, Kawiti watched and Kawiti saw. That day, *Inkosi*, when you stepped in front of the man at whom the mud was thrown, that day I knew. It was a clever thing you did then, *Inkosi*. Had you not done just so there would have been much fighting; many skulls would have been crushed, many ribs broken. Again, tonight I watched you drinking beer in the hut. You were not drunk, *Inkosi*, though Paul Santie thought you were. And—and that's all," Kawiti concluded.

"That is enough," Stevens said rather disgustedly. "But how many have you told that I have been playing a game?"

"Au-a, Inkosi!" Kawiti exclaimed indignantly. "Am I then a fool? I saw that

the *inkosi* had a game to play. Who am I that I should make his play a thing of no account? I told no one, *Inkosi.*"

"And no one else saw what you saw?"

"Of that I am sure, *Inkosi.*" Kawiti was very confident. "They saw only what Paul Santie told them to see, what they wanted to see. They saw only a white man who was a fool."

"What of the spoor which vanishes?" Stevens asked after a few minutes of silence.

Kawiti moved uneasily.

"That is something of the spirits. Who can talk about that?"

"Can't you?"

Kawiti shook his head violently.

"Nay, *Inkosi.* Three times I have followed the spoor of cattle to a certain place and then—*poof*—there is no more spoor. Truly the cattle are carried away by the Great Spirits. Perhaps the Great Ones get hungry up there."

"Maybe. And is the spoor always in the same place?"

"Yah, *Inkosi.*"

"And it has not been seen since I came to this place?"

"Nay, *Inkosi.*"

"Show me where the spoor appears. Is it near here?"

"Nay, *Inkosi;* it is near to the Mpakwe huts. See, here is the way of it."

WITH his forefinger Kawiti traced a rude map on the dirt floor of the hut.

"Here is Radicaladi's kraal," he explained. "This is the river we call Ramaquabane and this the cattle fence. Here the Mpakwe River bends back on itself like a snake. This, *Inkosi,* is the police post at Mpakwe. That is Baas Kennedy's place; that is Baas Courtland's. The spoor comes here, *Inkosi,* across the river from Radicladi's kraal. There the river is shallow even at time of flood. I have followed the spoor to the fence at this place. There it stopped and there is no more sign of it. At that point it vanishes. Truly the cattle are taken by the Spirits of the Great Ones."

"Maybe," Stevens said thoughtfully. "But tell me, do the spirits break down the fence in order that their cattle may pass through?"

"Nay, *Inkosi,*" Kawiti said slowly, "but one time it seemed to me that the wires had been cut and then mended again."

"Um!"

"But the beasts had not passed through, *Inkosi.* At the fence the spoor stopped. It did not go on or back."

"Perhaps the ground thereabouts is hard and you could not see the spoor."

"The ground is hard, true, *Inkosi,* but no harder than where my eyes could see the spoor."

Stevens waved his hand as if dismissing the subject as unworthy of discussion.

"I do not think Paul Santie is a good cook boy, *Inkosi,*" Kawiti said presently.

"No!" Stevens said grimly, thinking of the letter he had received from Captain Murray. "Neither do I. He shall cook for me no longer."

"My nephew—he is not a good cook, *Inkosi,* but at least he is clean and knows the way an *inkosi* should be spoken to. Also, he speaks Engleesh, of a sort. He can be your mouthpiece if you still desire to play a part."

"After tomorrow there will be no need, perhaps. But, for the rest, your nephew may serve. Now tell me, are the men at Mpakwe post true men?"

"Yah. *Inkosi.* He who went from here sick sent them to that place because they are good hunters, know how to follow the spoor."

Stevens nodded.

"Good. Tomorrow we go to the dipping tank and teach Mphoengs how to dip his cattle. All the police boys will be there, you in charge. They must be clean. First they must prepare the dip *muti* in the tank. You know how it is done?"

Kawiti nodded and saluted.

"It is an order, *Inkosi.* Are they to know that you have been playing a part?"

"Not until tomorrow. I will tell them myself. The order as to cleanliness and the work they are to do must come from you. Can you make them obey?"

Kawiti expanded his mighty chest, flexed his supple muscles and smiled assurance.

"Good," Stevens commented. "Now one thing more. Bring Paul to me when he returns."

Again Kawiti saluted and left the hut.

IN A small hut at the outskirts of Mphoengs' kraal, Paul Santie at that moment was being interviewed by Butch Kennedy.

Kennedy seemed to be greatly concerned about a letter which Paul said he had

burned after reading. Paul did not dare confess that he had lost the letter he had purloined. However, he had a remarkably good memory—unfortunately for him—and he was able to quote it almost word for word. Paul did no: return to the police quarters that nigh.; indeed he never returned.

The next day, assured by Kawiti that the natives were gathering at the tank for a big *indaba*, Stevens bathed, shaved himself with meticulous care and dressed in a spotlessly clean khaki uniform, the buttons and insignia of which glistened like gold.

At eleven o'clock the police boys, instructed by Kawiti, lined up for inspection outside the office hut. The big native must have worked miracles overnight. The severest critic could not have found fault with the police boys' equipment; a white handkerchief passed over their antiquated Martini Henrys would have come away unsoiled.

Stevens nodded approval and, placing himself at their head, marched toward the dipping tank.

Just beyond the police camp they were met by Kennedy.

Stevens hailed him with relief.

"Looks like a full-dress parade," Kennedy said sarcastically. "Why all the eye-wash?"

"I had a letter from Captain Murray saying he'd put me on the pef if I didn't spruce up. Wonder who's been telling tales? Old Courtland I suppose."

"Shouldn't wonder," Kennedy murmured, looking sharply at the policeman.

"It's a damned shame," Stevens went on. "What's the good of sprucing up in a place like this. And I've had a hell of a time making these fellows understand that they've got to clean up in future."

"What's the matter with Paul; couldn't he interpret?"

"No, I haven't seen him since last night." Stevens lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. "In that letter from the captain, he said that Brockford, the chap who was here before me, was poisoned. I had a lot of kaffir beer last night, and I was drunk and I think I accused Paul of poisoning poor old Brockford. So I think Paul's deserted. Perhaps I offended him." Stevens laughed self-consciously.

Kennedy grunted.

"I shouldn't be surprised if he did poison Brockford. I told you Paul Santie was a bad nigger. If he's deserted, it's because he's afraid you have the goods on him. Well, you're well rid of him. At least he gave Mphoengs your message. Man, you must have been drunk. When I got here this morning the old chief was in a hell of a rage. He said that you'd threatened to sjambok him and put him in *trunk* for a year. He was in half a mind to send some of his warriors after you. But I soothed him down. Come on; they're all waiting for you at the tank. Lucky for you, just the same, that I'm here. Leave everything to me—but if anything goes wrong, it'll be because of that fool message of yours."

THEY came presently to the tank. It was really a large, concrete bath, narrow, built into the ground. The approach to it sloped gently so that the cattle could walk into it, swim a few feet and scramble out at the other end.

On one side of the tank all the men of the kraal were gathered, several hundred all told. Behind them were the cattle pens.

Seated on an empty crate placed near the edge of the tank was the fat old chief. He eyed Stevens arrogantly and an expression of alarmed surprise crossed his face as the police boys lined up before him, between him and his people.

The two white men climbed up onto the low, narrow wall which guarded the sides of the tank; there they could be seen by everybody.

"Leave all this to me," Kennedy whispered to Stevens. "I know just how to handle them." He raised his hand for silence.

"Mphoengs," he shouted, "and you people of Mphoengs. I am the mouthpiece of this white man who, as you can see for yourselves, is the mouthpiece of the government. He says that you must drive your cattle through this water over which he has made a charm and by so doing you will save your cattle from the plague. That is the word of this white man who is the mouthpiece of the government. Now pay good heed to me. I am no longer his mouthpiece or the mouthpiece of any one. I speak to you now as your friend. You all know me, and know that I am not accustomed to dealing in lies. This, then, is what I would say to you. You know that once before the cattle plague came upon you and that out of a hundred beasts only ten were spared. Then you all grieved. The stench of dead beasts filled the air; all your bellies were empty. There was no marriage or giving in marriage, no feast-

ing. But the white men rejoiced. They waxed very fat. *Au-a!* Therein I am shamed, for I too am white. They waxed fat, I say, on your misery. Now that they see that your cattle are increasing, they begin to fear you again.

"So they talk of plagues and pretend that this," he indicated the tank, "is a charm to ward off the evil. *Au-a!* It is a lie! I tell you, Mphoengs and you people of Mphoengs, that, if you send your cattle in that, it will kill them. Aye, they will swell up before your eyes and——"

At that moment Stevens seemed to lose his balance and to save himself from falling into the tank grabbed hold of Kennedy. Rather, he attempted to hold on to Kennedy but only succeeded in pushing that man so that he lost his balance, teetered for a moment on the very edge of the wall, then fell with a mighty splash into the evil-smelling disinfecting solution. At the same time Stevens regained his balance and jumped back to the solid ground.

Bellowing with rage, Kennedy climbed out of the tank, looking like a half-drowned rat.

As Stevens ran to him, full of apologies and commiserations, Kennedy thrust him roughly to one side.

"You damned fool," he snarled, "get yourself out of this mess! I'm through trying to help fools."

Then he hurried away, for the water was cold and his teeth were chattering. Kennedy had been in the country too long to chance an attack of malaria.

Mphoengs rose as if intending to hurry after the white man, but Kawiti thrust him down again with no gentle hand.

"Listen to me, Mphoengs, and you people of Mphoengs!" Stevens had climbed up onto the wall again, and as he spoke in the vernacular a low "*Au-a!*" of amazement came from the men.

"You heard what that one said to you when he was speaking as my mouthpiece; again you heard what he said when he spoke to you as your friend. Judge you now which was true, which was false. He said that this water, into which has been put much strong medicine, will cause your cattle to die. Yet he fell into it and has suffered no harm. Is he, then, stronger than an ox? I think not. I say to you, and I am no liar, that it will only kill the tick-which-is-all-belly, the tick which sucks the blood of your oxen, the tick whose bite is more to be feared than the bite of a momba."

"It may be, white man, that the medicine is only harmful to cattle and that is why Baas Kennedy came out of it unharmed," said the old chief.

"Well said, Mphoengs. That may be so. Listen again then: who will sell me an old cow, one that has ceased to bear young?"

"I will, white man, if the price be right."

"Is ten pounds a good price for such a beast, Mphoengs?"

"It is a fair price, white man." The old chief's eyes glistened greedily.

Stevens counted out ten sovereigns and gave them to the chief.

"Let the cow be brought," he ordered.

Mphoengs shouted some orders and a few minutes later two natives led an aged cow up to Stevens. It could scarcely walk, and was so thin that its bones threatened to break through the skin. It was bleeding from several wounds in the neck and body where some other beast had horned it.

"I'll sell you ten like that, white man," a warrior at the back shouted, "and ask no more for the ten than Mphoengs did for the one."

This was greeted with a shout of laughter.

Stevens appealed for silence.

"Then you will believe," he shouted, "that if the medicine in the tank does not hurt this beast it cannot hurt any other."

"Aye! But it will die before it gets there if you do not hurry, white man," they shouted.

"If it goes in and comes out unharmed—then you will order all your cattle to be dipped, Mphoengs?"

"At least we will talk of it, white man," the old chief said cautiously.

"Good."

At Stevens' command the cow was led down the slope. She stumbled, recovered and, in a frantic endeavor to get away from the men who were prodding her with pointed sticks, entered the water.

The sting of the solution as it lapped about her open sores made her bellow and make for the opposite end of the tank with great speed. Quickly she scrambled out, and, her sores still smarting, lumbered clumsily away, her tail sticking upright, apparently as full of life as a two-year-old heifer.

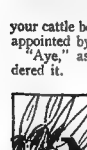
"Best buy her back, Mphoengs," a wit shouted. "She is young again; she will live to bear many calves."

"It is a strong medicine, white man," said Mphoengs.

"Truly. Then will you give orders that

your cattle be dipped—now, and at all times appointed by the government?"

"Aye," assented Mphoengs and so ordered it.



EXT evening as Stevens was eating a meal well prepared by Kawiti's nephew, two items of news were brought to him which immediately put all thought of food from his mind. The camp hummed with activity as the police boys hurried to obey the commands he issued in rapid-fire order.

Two men from the kraal reported that they had discovered the body of Paul Santie. He had been killed, they thought, by an assegai thrust. They judged that the murder—if murder it was—had been committed yesterday. In the intervening time vultures and hyenas had been feeding. There was no spoor about the body, no print of a man's foot save that of the victim.

So far as they knew no one really hated Paul Santie, not enough to kill him. For the matter of that, no one liked him. He was dead, and that was an end to it.

Stevens was inclined to believe them; not that he was content to accept their report without making an investigation of his own. Indeed he was about to accompany the two men to the place on the veld where they had found Paul, when Kawiti brought him the second report. Kawiti had that morning patroled the fence as far as half-way tree, where he had met the police boy from the Mpakwe post. That native had told Kawiti a strange tale.

Stevens listened silently until Kawiti had told his story.

"Can you ride?" he asked abruptly, then.

"Yah, *Inkosi*."

"Then you will come with me, riding the mule. We start now."

"But it is dark, *Inkosi*. The sun set many hours ago."

"No matter. We will be there by the rising of tomorrow's sun. There is no time to waste. I wish to see this spoor which vanishes. I want to talk to the police boy and hear his story."

Half an hour later they left the police camp, Stevens riding his horse, Kawiti mounted on the pack mule, a big-boned brute, well able to carry his bulk.

They rode hard through the night, disturbing the animals of the bush. Once a herd of zebra galloped along with them; once a pack of wild dogs chased them and only stopped when Stevens fired his revolver in their direction, bringing down one of the leaders of the pack, thereby providing the rest with a meal.

Sunrise saw Stevens and Kawiti at the Mpakwe post.

As they dismounted a man dragged himself wearily to the door of his hut.

His scalp was all bloody, and his body looked as if it had been severely beaten with a knobkerry.

"Sit down," Stevens said quietly, taking a bottle, salve and bandages from his saddle-wallets, "and I will tend to your wounds. First drink this. It will make a new man of you. Kawiti shall prepare skoff."

He gave the native the bottle in which was a little whisky. The native slumped down on the ground, his back against the side of the hut; he drank the whisky, gagged at the burn of it, and looked at Stevens with wondering eyes.

"The *inkosi* speaks our tongue," he said slowly. "Yet the other day——"

"Never mind that now," Stevens said patiently as he began to dress the man's wounds. "Tell me of the other thing."

"Aye, *Inkosi*. So it was: just before the setting of the sun two days ago Guffa—he was here with me; my name is Matiswa—said he was going up the fence a little way to see that all was well. He went because we had heard, earlier in the day, the cry of the spirits at Three Kopjes. He went and I slept. I know not how long. I was awakened suddenly. It seemed to me that I heard someone call out in fear. I listened, *Inkosi*. I heard another cry, and it was the voice of Guffa, I thought.

"So I took my gun—my assegai I could not find—and my knobkerry and went out calling, 'Guffa! Guffa!' Then a voice called, 'Here! to me, Matiswa!' and I ran speedily in the direction of the cry.

"Presently I stopped, not sure of my direction in the darkness, and shouted again. Then something hit me on the back of my head, hit me again and I fell like a log. When I came to again it was morning and my bones ached; my head seemed split in two.

"For a little while I was as a man half asleep, not knowing where I was. Then I remembered. Rising, I looked about and saw many things. First, Guffa's gun leaning against the fence. When I went to take it up I saw the spoor of cattle, coming up to the fence from the river. But at the fence the spoor stopped. It did not go back

to the river; neither did it show on this side of the fence."

"How many head of cattle?" Stevens interposed quickly.

"Twenty-one, I should judge, *Inkosi*. Aye. Twenty-one, maybe more, for it was hard to judge. Undoubtedly they were well herded for the spoor of them was close."

Stevens nodded.

"Go on," he said. "And then——"

"And then, *Inkosi*, I was afraid and desired to get away from that place. Truly the spirits must have been abroad. But first I looked about for signs of Guffa. I found him, *Inkosi*, underneath a Mapani bush. He was dead, *Inkosi*. Sticking through his belly was an assegai, and that assegai, *Inkosi*, was mine!"

There was silence for a little while.

"Pardon, *Inkosi*, but Guffa was a man and my friend," Matiswa continued presently. "I covered his body with thorn bush and stones so that it might not be food for vultures, and hastened as well as I could along the fence to the half-way tree, where I met Kawiti."

"You should have waited here, Matiswa, and sent word by someone. You were too sick to patrol the fence."

"An order was given me," Matiswa said wearily, "to patrol the fence every day. And who was to be trusted to tell such a tale as I have told?"

"You have done well," Stevens said as, the bandaging done, he rose to his feet. "It shall not be forgotten."

"*Inkosi!*" murmured Matiswa and saluted feebly.

"Skoff will be ready in a little while, *Inkosi*," Kawiti shouted.

STEVENS went down to the river, bathed, shaved quickly and by the time the coffee was boiled had removed all traces of the night's long ride.

The meal was eaten quickly, Matiswa and Kawiti smacking their lips in great enjoyment over a tin of sardines which Stevens gave them to add spice to the mealie meal.

"You will stay here with Matiswa," Stevens ordered Kawiti. "It happened near here, Matiswa?"

"Yah, *Inkosi*. A few hundred spear-throws, that is all. The veld is bare at the place. First you pass through a patch of mapani; then you come to the place."

"Good. Soon other police will come from Mphoengs. They will take charge here and you will be taken to watch the gate at Mphoengs. There you shall sleep much and eat well."

Leaving the camp at a brisk walk, Stevens soon came to the clearing and saw the pile of stones and thorn bush which covered the body of Guffa. Climbing over the fence, he examined the ground closely and soon discovered the spoor of the cattle. He back-tracked it down to the place where it left the Ramaquabane River and then followed it up to the fence. There it stopped.

He frowned. He knew there must be some explanation. Cattle could not fly. The spoor showed that cattle had come to this point, as far as the fence, and there was no spoor to show what had happened to the cattle after that.

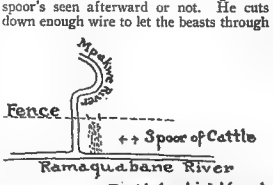
He examined the fence closely but that told him nothing. It had evidently been broken and mended several times, but there was nothing to tell him how recent the breaks were.

Stevens sat down on the stump of a tree, allowing his mind to become blank, hoping that some simple explanation of the mystery would come to him. His eyes were attracted by a metallic glitter on the ground nearby. He looked away, then back again. Quickly he rose to his feet and picked it up. It was a wire-cutter, and stamped on the handle were the innitials T. C.

"T. C.," he muttered. "Why, that's Thomas Courtland. Hell! That's all wrong."

He sat down again and dejectedly went over the situation in his mind.

"What happens, is this," he reasoned. "Somebody—let's say it's old Courtland—runs cattle over the Ramaquabane from Radicaldi's at night when there's little chance of being seen. Until he gets them to the fence he doesn't care a hang if the spoor's seen afterward or not. He cuts down enough wire to let the beasts through



in single-file and then, because if the spoor

is seen on this side it can be traced, he hits on some plan to make the spoor invisible. Now, what would I do, if I wanted to run cattle? Let me see. Here's how it is."

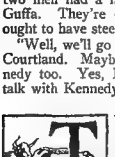
He traced a crude map on the ground.

"I have it," he exclaimed after a few moments' examination. "I'd pile a lot of brush and grass on the hundred yards of ground between the fence and the Mpakwe, lead the beasts over that and then drive them up the river bed to my farm. There's enough water in the Mpakwe to make that feasible. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't have to drive them up the river all the way. All I'd have to do would be to get them far enough away from the fence so that there'd be no possible chance of anyone connecting the spoor here with the spoor they'd make after coming up out of the river. That's it. Perhaps I'd drive them up the river all the way. It 'ud be absolutely safe then—and easier, in the dark.

"Only Courtland—if it was Courtland—didn't use brush and grass. If he did, there'd be sure to be some about; he couldn't possibly get it all up again.

"Last night while they were at work, Guffa happened to stumble on them. Perhaps they tried to bribe him to keep dark and, when he refused, killed him. Then they inveigled Matiswa out of the hut and knocked him out—perhaps they thought they'd killed him too. Then they got his assegai from the hut and stuck it in poor Guffa—trying to make it appear that the two men had a fight and Matiswa killed Guffa. They're clever devils! But they ought to have steered clear of murder.

"Well, we'll go and have a talk with old Courtland. Maybe I'll pay a visit to Kennedy too. Yes, I must certainly have a talk with Kennedy."



TWO hours later Stevens was riding about Courtland's farm, apparently lost. But in the course of his wanderings he scrutinized every beast on the farm and noticed that the brands were all old. At this he was greatly relieved, though it did not entirely clear Courtland of suspicion; not that he'd ever really suspected Courtland, not, at least, until finding the wire-cutters. Though he could understand a man like Courtland running cattle, he refused to believe him capable of committing murder. That was more in Kennedy's line, and Stevens was ready to believe anything of Kennedy.

If only Courtland could explain the wire-cutters.

Coming to a sudden decision, Stevens turned his horse and galloped up to the homestead.

He was about a hundred yards away when a rifle bullet whined past his ears. He pulled his horse to a walk and rode forward, holding his hand above his head.

As he came to the house Grace Courtland came out, rifle in hand, her eyes blazing angrily.

Stevens laughed.

"Not a very good shot, are you?"

"If I had shot to kill," she answered fiercely, "you wouldn't have heard the bullet, Trooper Stevens."

"But why such a warm reception?"

"Because you're a sneak. Keep your hands up. I've been watching you through these." She touched the field-glasses which hung from a cord about her neck. "Why are you prowling about the farm?"

"I was lost—" he began lamely.

"Don't lie. You're just a trouble-maker. You were hoping to find a cow looking sick so's you'd have an excuse to shoot the whole herd. That's the smart aleck sort of a thing you would do and expect to get promoted."

"I was lost—" he began again.

She stopped him with an imperative gesture.

"I've asked you once not to lie. You fooled us all once, pretending not to know anything. That won't go again. Now tell me the truth. What are you doing up here?"

"I found some wire-cutters of your father's. I came to return them. Now I'm going to lower my hands. Shoot if you want to."

She watched him closely as he took the wire-cutters out of his saddle-wallet.

"Throw them on the ground," she ordered.

He shook his head.

"No; I want to have a talk with your father first. Where is he?"

"Down at the dipping tank, but I'd advise you not to go there. He'll welcome you in a warmer way than I have!"

"Then he's going to dip?"

"He said he would if Mphoengs did. He keeps his word."

"Do you know where your father was night before last?" Stevens asked.

"None of your business," she cried. "Now get."

Stevens, saluting, rode off in the direction of the dipping tank. The girl looked after him wistfully. She saw so few men and there was much about Stevens to commend him.

Stevens found Courtland watching his native laborers preparing the dipping solution. As soon as he saw Stevens he drew his revolver and ordered the policeman from the place.

Courtland's laborers grouped behind their employer, waving sticks and shovels, evidently spoiling for a fight, and Stevens, seeing that Courtland was beyond listening to reason, rode away. He was quite disgusted with the way he had handled the situation.

"At any rate," he thought, "I've discovered that old Courtland's natives are loyal to him. That means something."

E crossed the shallow Mpakwe River and headed for Kennedy's place, arriving at the homestead just as Kennedy came out of the house and mounted his horse. Several native women hung about the place; one of them was nursing a half-caste baby.

"I was just going to ride over to Courtland's place," Kennedy bellowed. "Want to come?"

"No," Stevens said decidedly. "I've just come from there."

Kennedy laughed.

"And he ordered you off the place, eh? Miss Grace backed him up, I'll bet."

Stevens nodded.

"Well, you don't want to let that bother you. I told you old Courtland's queer and Grace has to humor him at times. He doesn't like you. That reminds me; I've got a little grudge to settle with you myself." His laugh was not at all pleasant. "That was a hell of a joke you tried to play on us," he went on, "but I saw through you the first day I met you. I knew you weren't such a fool as you looked. Course I pretended to believe you and when I interpreted for you the other morning I made up my mind to play a joke on you. I'd have carried it through, too, if I hadn't lost my balance and fell into the bloody tank.

"Say, anything come up about old Courtland, I ought to know?" he switched onto another task. "Has he been doing anything lately he shouldn't do?"

"Well," Stevens hesitated, "since I saw you last two men have been murdered."

"What? White men murdered? And you think old Courtland did it?"

Stevens shook his head.

"No, I don't exactly suspect Courtland —yet. They weren't white men. Two days ago Paul Santie was found dead with an assegai sticking in him."

"I always said that nigger 'ud come to a bad end," Kennedy grunted. "He played around with other nigger's wives too much. Well, good riddance to bad rubbish. Who was the other one?"

"Guffa, one of the police boys at the post here."

"Who says he was murdered?"

"The other boy, Matiswa." Stevens told Kennedy the story Matiswa had told him.

"Bosh!" Kennedy exclaimed when he had finished. "Don't you see what happened? They had a row. Matiswa killed Guffa and then cooked up this cock and bull story. I thought you had more sense than to swallow a yarn like that."

"I didn't say I believed it," Stevens commented mildly.

"I should say not." Kennedy's tone was very contemptuous.

"No, I didn't say I believed Matiswa and I've put him under arrest. Just the same, that doesn't explain the vanishing spoor."

"Oh, that damned fool yarn again. Most of it is just plain nigger superstition and you've heard it so often that you see just what you have been told to see. I'm willing to bet that if you'd take me to the place I'd be seeing this vanishing spoor too."

"Yes, I think you would," Stevens agreed shortly.

"Well, that's neither here nor there. Come on. If you won't go with me to Courtland's I'll ride with you as far as my fence."

Stevens hesitated a moment. He wanted to look over Kennedy's farm, but, seeing that the big man would not allow him to do that, he turned his horse and the two rode away from the house.

For a time they rode in silence and Stevens was conscious of a feeling of antagonism toward him emanating from Kennedy.

Soon they topped a rise which gave them a clear view of the district for miles round. In the rear distance Stevens could see three hills—low, boulder-strewn and truncated cone shaped—rising sheer out of the plain.

"I'd like to go over there and explore around a bit," Stevens waved his hand in

the direction of the hills. "They look as if they are protecting some dark secret."

Kennedy looked at him sharply.

"If you'll take my advice you'll keep away from Three Kopjes," he answered. "In the first place, I don't like anybody fooling about my property. I get pretty nervous at times and take pot shots at people I see wandering about—and I'm a good shot. I don't often miss. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Stevens assented innocently.

"In the second place, Three Kopjes has the reputation of being haunted." Kennedy went on in milder tones. "That's more superstition, of course. But this is true: several men who had no business there have been found dead at the foot of the kopjes and there was no sign of what killed them."

"Cheerful place," Stevens exclaimed, "and a nice cheerful way you have of talking."

"Very," Kennedy agreed with an awkward attempt at good-humored banter. "But don't forget," he added grimly, "I keep my word." He pulled up his horse. "Good-by," he said gruffly. "We part company here."

They had come to the gate in his fence.

"But I thought you were going to Courtland's place?"

"I've changed my mind. I'm going to stay here and watch my place. I'd advise you not to fool around the neighborhood."

"Getting nasty, eh?"

"Look at it that way, if you like. Point is, we're law-abiding people up here and we're not going to stand for a young squirt like yourself butting in on our affairs. I warn you, if I see anyone on my land from now on, I shoot first and ask questions afterward. There's going to be no one to prove that the shooting wasn't accidental —or suicide, for the matter of that."

"Pretty soon," taunted Stevens, "I shall be thinking you poisoned Brockford and killed Paul Santie and Guffa."

Kennedy's face flushed an angry red and his big hairy paw dropped to his revolver holster. Then he let his hand fall to his side.

"Think anything you damn please, and any time you think you've got evidence that confirms your fool thoughts come and arrest me. I'll be waiting."

"Thanks, I will. And I'm not a bad shot myself. Remember that."

Stevens spurred his horse and rode off, again feeling baffled, condemning himself for having acted undiplomatically. At the same time he was glad that Kennedy had exposed his claws. It entirely settled in his mind that Kennedy was at the bottom of all the trouble in the district. All he had to do now was to collect the evidence. It was a big order, but at least he knew where he stood.

He realized, too, that Kennedy would not hesitate to shoot him on sight, or get rid of him in some other way not quite so clean. One only had to hear the man talk, see the murder-light which gleamed in his eyes at moments of anger, or when he was off guard, to know that he was absolutely ruthless.

RETURNING to the Mpakwe police post, Stevens discovered that the two other police boys had come up from Mphoengs as he ordered, and that Matiswa absolutely refused to leave.

"Guffa was a man," Matiswa said. "He was my friend. I cannot go from this place until his spirit is at rest."

Stevens did not assert his authority, but talked with Matiswa of many things, making the native completely at ease. Chiefly he led the conversation to the Courtlands and Kennedy.

After a time he asked about Three Kopjes and learning that only recently—since the present outbreak of cattle fever, in fact, —had the spirits chosen to live in that place.

"And now, *Inkosi*," Matiswa concluded, "no man will go near that place. No, not even the men who work for Baas Kennedy."

It was this that decided Stevens to explore the regions about the forbidden place, this and the fact that Kennedy had warned him away.

When he announced his intentions to Kawiti that night, the native begged that he be allowed to go too.

"No," Stevens ordered. "You will stay here, sleeping in my hut. If anyone ask why you remain in it, you will say that you are keeping guard over me. I shall sleep soundly." He laughed and pointed to the reed bed in the corner of the hut. He had arranged the blankets so that it looked as if someone was sleeping there. "They will not question you when they see that."

Quietly he left the hut, no one knowing of his departure except Kawiti.

His eyes soon became accustomed to the darkness and he hastened through the bush with the assurance of a veld-wise man. Not

a twig cracked beneath his feet; no rattle of stones betrayed his progress, and not once did he check his pace in order to make sure of his bearings. Most natives—if they have not been contaminated by civilization—have this power, this sense of direction, developed very highly, but it is possessed by very few white men. In Stevens it was developed so highly as to be almost uncanny.

At just the right spot he turned abruptly to his right and crossed the Mpakwe River dryshod, using the boulders which jutted out above the water as stepping-stones. Having crossed the river, he followed its course up-stream for half an hour or so. Then he halted, put out his hand and took hold of the top strand of the wire fence which encircled Kennedy's farm.

He climbed it, then went on again, making a wide detour to avoid coming too close to the house. He remembered having seen several mangy looking curs about the place, and did not want them to catch his scent.

He came to Three Kopjes in the gray half-light of morning and, encircling their base, found a ravine leading into the heart of them. The ground was pitted with the hoofprints of many cattle.

Revolver in hand he followed the ravine and presently came to a large pole stockade, very stoutly built. In the stockade were crowded a hundred or more head of cattle.

"He keeps them here," Stevens reasoned, "until he has branded them and the brands have had time to age somewhat. But how am I going to prove that Kennedy ran these cattle in from over the river? Now I must get way from here; it's a bad place in which to be caught."

He quickly retraced his steps, making a bee-line for the Mpakwe River, intending to cross it. It would be better to be held up by the Courtlands than to fall into the hands of Kennedy. He ran swiftly, hoping that Kennedy was a late riser and did not ride the bounds of his farm so early in the morning.

Luck was with him. Although his course took him within a few hundred yards of the house no one saw him.

For a moment he considered confronting Kennedy with his discovery, but quickly decided that such a course would be unwise. After all he had only circumstantial evidence to go on, and it was not of a sort to hold water in court. If he acted prematurely, it would only serve to put Kennedy on guard. Kennedy would stop running cattle—and be safe.

STEVENS crossed the river and, feeling comparatively secure now that he was off Kennedy's land, he sought the shelter of a thick clump of bushes, intending to sleep for a few hours.

Hardly had he seated himself comfortably when he heard the patter of footsteps and, peering cautiously through the bushes, saw Grace Courtland running down toward the river.

She wore a gaily-patterned bathrobe; her hair hung down her back in two thick braids; in her hand she carried a towel.

With a feeling of intense irritation Stevens realized that she was coming his way; that she would probably use the bushes as a dressing-room after her swim.

He drew his revolver and waited.

Presently she came to the bushes where he was hidden, hung her towel over a branch and slipped her feet out of her slippers.

"Stand quite still," Stevens said quietly. "Don't cry out; I've got you covered."

Save that she stiffened slightly and thrust her feet back into the slippers again, she did not move. The expression on her face was contemptuous, but there was no sign of fear.

"Now sit down," Stevens ordered, "and act naturally. Suppose you unbraid your hair, for instance."

Again she obeyed him.

"That's fine," Stevens exclaimed with a sigh of relief. "I was afraid you'd do something foolish. Now we can have a little talk. For the present I prefer to remain out of sight in the bushes here and, if your father or any one else comes on the scene, you'll carry on as if you're alone. Remember, I have you covered."

She preserved a stony silence.

"Of course," he went on, "you think this is just another sneaking trick of mine and——"

"Well, isn't it?" she interposed hotly.

"No, I don't think so. But I'll let you judge. Do you know all the things that have happened up here in the past few weeks?"

"I don't understand you."

"Did you know that Brockford, the man who was here before me, is dead. He was poisoned."

She started slightly.

"From what I've heard about him, the world's a better place," she answered coldly.

"I suppose Kennedy told you all about him, eh? Well, let that pass. Then Paul Santie and Guffa, both police boys, were also murdered."

"Yes, I've heard all about them. I was sorry about Guffa. He always seemed to me a good native. Still I don't see how this can affect me. Why should I be interested in the quarrels of natives?"

"Not much perhaps. Only it's my theory that one person—a white person—was responsible for all three murders."

Again she started slightly.

"But you're not accusing me, surely?"

"No."

"Then who?"

"No one, yet. But you remember I asked you where your father was——"

"Oh, it's not father!" she cried. "No, no. You're trying to frighten me. Why, father —" She stopped, realizing that her protestations were uncalled for. "You're talking nonsense," she said tersely after a moment's pause.

"Maybe. But I haven't told you all. The other night someone ran twenty-one head of cattle across the river. I know who that some one is. And I'm sure that that someone murdered Guffa." He peered through the bushes, trying to read the expression on her face.

She was silent.

Stevens fumbled in his pocket and, extracting the wire-cutters, tossed them to her.

She picked them up listlessly.

"Do you know whose they are?" he asked.

"Yes. They're father's."

"I found them near the fence the day after that batch of cattle was run across. They must have dropped by the man who did the running—and the same man killed Guffa."

"Oh!" It was a half-stifled scream. "You rotter—you, you trapped me into incriminating father." She threw the wire-cutters from her.

"As for that," he interposed dryly, "you didn't incriminate him. His initials are stamped on the cutter. I shall make the wire-cutters exhibit A."

"You call that proof," she said scornfully, quickly recovering her poise. "Father—er—lost that tool a long time ago."

"You've forgotten that I know who ran the cattle."

"You're wrong," she exclaimed passionately. "All wrong. Father might run cattle across, but he wouldn't commit murder. Not that!"

Again she stopped abruptly, and for the first time she turned her face toward the bush behind which he was crouching.

He read the appeal in her eyes and with difficulty restrained the impulse to rush out and offer sympathy and express his utmost confidence in her father's innocence.

"So you admit that your father has been running cattle?" he said gravely, instead.

"Yes—no. I don't know what to think, but I admit nothing."

"Well, what do you think? Please believe that I am trying to help you."

She made a fluttering, appealing gesture with her hands.

"I do believe that—now. I'm afraid I've acted very foolishly, but you see, so many misfortunes have come our way which seemed to unbalance father and"—again the appealing gesture of her hands —"I didn't know whether it was safe to trust you. Mr. Kennedy was sure that you were a trouble-maker, and father hates all government officials—specially the police. The way you have acted seemed to bear out Mr. Kennedy's suspicions of you. First you pose as something you're not; then you come sneaking about the property and—well, you can see how I formed the impression of you I did.

"Father's threatened to run cattle across the river; not for the sake of gain, but in order to spite the police. He'd do almost anything to cause them trouble. And I've always been afraid that he would carry out his threats, knowing that there was danger of losing all he has should he do anything so criminal. I've had to watch him very closely and after a time I asked Mr. Kennedy to help me. I wish I hadn't," she added bitterly.

"Why?"

"Because he took to coming over here a great deal and watched father incessantly. Only a week ago he said that he had definite proof that father was running cattle, and I don't know where father was the night you say Guffa was killed. But father never killed anyone, I'm sure of that. You don't believe he did, do you?"

"No," Stevens hastily assured her. "Now one thing more: if Kennedy has proof that your father is running cattle, why doesn't he report it?"

"Because," she answered slowly, "because I promised to marry him."

"Ah, I see."

There was silence for a little while.

"What do you really think of Kennedy?" Stevens then asked.

She moved restlessly, braiding and unbraiding her hair.

"I don't know how to answer that," she said in a low voice. "He's always been so friendly, always willing to help. Yet," she shook her head, "I don't trust him. He has a reputation for being cruel to his native laborers and I can't help feeling that his air of good-humor is only a pose. Father seems to think that he's splendid, but I——"

Her voice trailed off into silence.

"Then you don't—er—love him? If it weren't for this affair of your father's you wouldn't marry him?"

She shook her head slowly; tears welled up in her eyes.

"Where is your father now? Do you think he'd let me talk to him?"

"If he were here, I'd make him," she said fiercely. "But I don't know where he is. I haven't seen him since yesterday afternoon."

"Did he say where he was going?"

"No."

"Weren't you worried when he didn't come back for skoff last night?"

"Yes. I thought he was going to run cattle again."

"Have you ever seen any of the cattle your father has run across?"

"No."

"Don't you think that's strange?"

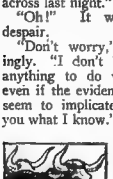
She looked confused.

"Why, why, I never thought of that?"

"Um. Well, I'll have to hurry back to the post. Perhaps more cattle were run across last night."

"Oh!" It was an exclamation of despair.

"Don't worry," Stevens spoke soothingly. "I don't believe your father has anything to do with this cattle-running even if the evidence, as you know it, does seem to implicate him. Listen: I'll tell you what I know."



HE OUTLINED briefly the events of the past few days, the girl's attitude changing from one of surprise to horror and loathing for the man who was at the bottom of all this crime.

"If I could only discover a way in which Kennedy gets the cattle from the fence to the Mpakwe River without leaving a spoor, my case would be complete," he concluded. "As it is now, I'd be laughed out of court. Once get him convicted of cattle-running, the rest would be simple. As long as he's free, his native accomplices will keep silent because their fear of him is infinitely greater than their fear of being found out. I'll have to catch him in the act—that's all."

"But he's cunning," she demurred. "He'll know you're watching and won't make a move."

"Oh, I'll find a way. Suppose you send a native over to Kennedy with a letter saying that I was here this morning and boasted that I'd discovered who was running cattle. Tell him I am on my way to headquarters to make a report, ask for a warrant and recommend that additional police be appointed to the Mpakwe post to watch the fence day and night. Say, too, that you are afraid that I have sufficient evidence against your father to prove his guilt conclusively. Tell him about the wire-cutters I found near the fence and plead for his help. There, can you remember all that?"

"I think so." She repeated the gist of his instructions. "But what good will that do?"

"If I know my man, he'll believe what you say. He's so confident that I have no evidence against him—and I haven't any proof yet, you know. He'll have me watched, of course, and as soon as he hears that I have left he'll run another batch or two of cattle over, knowing that if more police are attached to Mpakwe post further opportunities for making easy money will be lost. Do you see?"

She nodded.

"After you've sent him that note, get away somewhere where Kennedy can't find you. He's dangerous, and I don't like to think of you near danger."

"I'll do as you say; but I can take care of myself," she said, and there was a note of gaiety in her voice. "I'm never without this and I know how to use it."

From the pocket of her bathrobe she took a small but very efficient-looking revolver and glanced demurely toward the bushes.

Stevens chuckled softly.

"And you let me hold you up!"

"Yes. I knew you were here. I saw you from the house."

"Then why—?" Stevens was bewildered.

"Perhaps it was because I—I wanted to hear you talk."

"I wonder if you'll let me talk to you a

lot when we've settled this business?" Stevens exclaimed impetuously.

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On what you have to say," and rising to her feet she ran swiftly up to the house.

Stevens waited a few minutes, then started on the long trek back to the Mpakwe police camp.

IT WAS late afternoon by the time Stevens arrived at the Mpakwe police post. Kawiti greeted him as one newly arisen from the dead.

"I was beginning to think, *Inkosi*," he said, "that I should have to stay in the hut forever. Did you go to Three Kopjes?" he added curiously.

"Aye."

"And saw the spirits?"

"Truly. They have four legs and wear horns on their heads."

"It is not well to make a jest of the Great Ones," Kawiti reproved.

"Maybe not. But I never knew that the spirits inhabitated the bodies of oxen."

"*Au-a!*" Kawiti looked very wise. "Is it that way, *Inkosi?*"

"Truly. Now let me have food. While I am eating tell the two police boys to saddle my horse and that mule of yours, also to get their *impahle* packed."

"The *inkosi* treks again?"

"Aye. We are going back to Mphoengs—at least they will go. I shall go only a little way with them. When darkness falls I shall return to this place on foot."

Kawiti nodded.

"And what of me?"

"You stay here until I come."

"Good, *Inkosi*."

"Where is Matiswa?"

"I don't know, *Inkosi*. He left the post an hour ago and told no one where he was going."

Two hours later, just as the sun was setting, Stevens rode out of the camp followed closely by the two police boys.

As they left, a native, who had been watching the camp from the branch of a nearby tree, descended quickly from his vantage post and, mounting his horse which was concealed in a thicket, rode hastily away.

Stevens, who had been aware all along of the native's presence, chuckled softly.

The sun set; darkness came quickly. The little party went on, noisily, the natives singing wild chants.

Half an hour later Stevens slipped quietly from his horse, handed the reins to one of the police boys, and after a few whispered commands made his way stealthily back to the Mpakwe post.

Several times he halted, standing quite motionless, hardly breathing, his senses alive to the noise of the bush, isolating them, attributing to each its source.

No sound that was foreign to the bush came to him save the song of the two police boys; that was growing fainter with each passing moment.

When Stevens came to the police post he at once went to his hut, expecting to find Kawiti there. But the hut was empty; he knew that instantly, although the place was darker, if possible, than the night outside. He entered the other huts, exploring the walls and floor with his bare hands, seeking something that would explain Kawiti's absence.

He lighted no matches. If the camp were being watched, as he imagined, that would betray his presence and death probably would follow very quickly.

Inside the store hut Stevens's groping hands missed a coil of wire that should have been hanging from a peg in the wall. It's absence relieved his mind of a vague fear that Kawiti had been killed. The explanation, after all, was very simple: someone had reported a break in the fence and Kawiti had gone to repair it.

Stevens left the hut and sat down on the ground, his back against the wall, completely relaxing.

The darkness was intense, pall-like; as if a black velvet curtain were suspended between earth and sky.

Above, through slits in the velvet, a few stars showed.

Time passed very slowly. Still Kawiti did not return, and Stevens's earlier fear came back with increased force. Perhaps——

He rose to his feet and made his way down to the fence. Below he could hear the lazy gurgle of the river; on the other side he could see pinpoints of light which marked the location of Radicladi's kraal. As he watched, other lights appeared, nearer, moving. They vanished, appeared again, vanished. Confused noises came to his ears; men shouting and the low bellowing of cattle, the yapping of dogs.

"Ah!" It was a sucking intake of breath rather than an exclamation and, every faculty on the alert, Stevens made

his way cautiously along the fence to the place where the vanishing spoor appeared.

Near there, just on the edge of the clearing, he halted and, getting down on his belly, endeavored to pierce the darkness.

He was conscious of noises all about him in the bush, vague rustlings, vaguer whispers. Presently he could make out three forms standing close to the fence. One of them was the massive figure of Kennedy; there was no mistaking that.

The sky was now glowing phosphorescently with the soft light of myriads of stars. From the river came the sound of splashing.

Stevens heard a *snip* and the *whee-ang* of parting wire; he felt the strand of the fence to which he was holding slacken. The wires had been cut.

The men talked for a while; then two of them went toward the Mpakwe River, away from the fence. Kennedy waited.

When the two reappeared others had joined them. They were pushing forward something huge and white. It left a trail behind it. A broad trail; a white trail, looking like a path of snow. It covered the ground between the river and the fence—a carpet of stout canvas.

The lowing of cattle sounded very near. They were scrambling up the steep bank of the Ramaquabane. In a little while Stevens saw them looming up in the darkness like prehistoric monsters. Each one guided by a rope about the horns, was brought up to the narrow strip of white and led carefully across and down the bank to the bed of the Mpakwe.

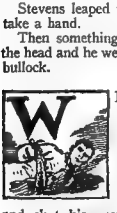
Three beasts Stevens watched escorted in this way. Then, just as he was about to proclaim his presence, someone on the opposite side of the clearing shouted.

"Hands up!" It was Courtland's voice.

His order was answered by a wild, fierce yell. A streak of flame—a report—a dull thud!

Stevens leaped to his feet, intending to take a hand.

Then something hit him at the back of the head and he went down like a pole-axed bullock.



WHEN Stevens opened his eyes again he found himself lying on the dagha floor of Kennedy's house. He was he discovered, bound hand and foot.

He blinked painfully and shut his eyes, dazzled by the light from the oil lamp which was fixed in a wall bracket.

Someone kicked him in the ribs. Opening his eyes again, he looked full into the leering face of Kennedy.

"You think you're damned smart, don't you, you and that old fool, Courtland?" he taunted.

"I don't know about Courtland," Stevens said, with a calmness he was far from feeling, "but I know I've got the goods on you."

Kennedy laughed.

"You mean you think you have. Just what, for instance, do you think you know?"

"I know you've been running cattle. I know where you cache them. I know how you hide the spoor, and I know that you were responsible for three murders."

"Make it five," Kennedy sneered. "I don't think old Courtland's going to live. I know you're not."

"Courtland? Where is he?"

"Back at the fence."

"I'm a little bewildered. What's Courtland to do with it?"

"A damned lot—too damned much. He fooled me; but he showed his hand last night. All the time he's been beefing about the police and threatening to run cattle, he's been watching me, trying to catch me off guard. Tonight the old fool tried to hold me up, was going to arrest me. He wanted the honor all to himself, that's why he wouldn't confide in you. So he got knocked on the head—same as you. Damned clever you are, but, the funny part of it is, you never fooled me at all. Tried to make me believe that you'd left the post. Came back to watch. But I knew, and I had you watched. So I got your nigger called up to mend a break in the fence that's not there. He'll be broken all right; there were men waiting for him. You may know all about the cattle, but about the murders—that's just guess work."

"What I know will be enough to hang you."

"Don't talk like a damned fool."

Kennedy walked up and down the room several times, kicking at Stevens every time he passed him.

"So you've got evidence enough to hang me, have you. You won't live to give evidence against me. The niggers that help me run cattle will be back from Three Kopjes in about half an hour. They'll be bloody thirsty. Well, that's all right; I've got plenty of booze. See——"

He opened a cupboard, exposing row after row of squat, square-shaped bottles. He grinned meaningly.

"You know what niggers are after they've got their bellies full of white man's booze, don't you?"

"Yes," Stevens drawled. "They sometimes kill the man who gave it to them."

Kennedy blanched, cursed luridly and kicked viciously at Stevens.

"They won't kill me," he snarled. "I won't be here. But you will. They'll play with you—such nice little games. You'll be a long time dying."

A gleam of hope shone in Stevens's eyes. He still had a chance. He had crawled out of worse holes than this promised to be by "talking," by using his expert knowledge of the black man's psychology.

Kennedy saw the gleam and laughed sardonically.

"No," he said, answering Stevens's thoughts. "That's no way out. I'm not such a fool. I'm going to gag you before they come; and I'm going to be in a place where a shot will put a finish to you if they happen to get tender-hearted."

"You're pretty much of a mucker, aren't you?"

"Oh, I don't know. You can't say I didn't warn you to keep your nose out of my affairs. I warned Brockford, but he didn't take any notice; and you know what happened to him. Paul Santie was a good cook"—he laughed meaningly—"but he was getting restless. He was afraid of being found out; so he had to go. Guffa was like you—too damned nosey. So there you are."

"Yes, but what's going to happen to you when Captain Murray gets my report. I sent it in by the police boys who left last night."

"He won't get it. I don't think you've written one, as a matter of fact. If you did, why, it'll be in my hands before morning. Them particular boys are in my pay. But they don't know nothing. See?"

"You've thought of pretty well everything, but how are you going to explain my death and Courtland's?"

"Easy," Kenndey boasted. "If Courtland dies I say I killed him in a fight after I caught him in the act of running cattle. No one'll doubt it. He's boasted often that he would run cattle; he's in bad with the police anyway, the old fool. Even his daughter suspects him. If he lives and makes a fuss about it, I tell the same story. Suppose he lodges a complaint: who in hell's going to believe him?"

Stevens was about to tell Kennedy that Grace Courtland had all the evidence necessary to convict him, but he stopped himself in time. Better to let Kennedy think she knew nothing about the real state of affairs.

"Of course," Kennedy went on—he had an uncanny way of answering Stevens's thoughts, "Grace may have helped him to play his game. But I don't believe it. Or you might have told her things. Whether she knows or not, she'll keep her mouth shut. I'm going after her as soon as I'm through with you."

Stevens' eyes blazed.

"But how about me?" he answered quietly.

"You. Your body will be found between here and the half-way tree. Have you ever been able to say what killed a beast after it has been a night in the bush—dead or unprotected?"

Stevens was silent: He once saw a dead zebra picked clean by vultures and hyenas in less than an hour.

Kennedy's eyes blazed triumphantly; his face was flushed; the big veins of his neck stood out prominently.

From the distance came the sound of savage yells.

"My niggers are coming," Kennedy said. "And now I'm going to gag you." He took a dirty, red bandanna handkerchief from his pocket. "I've planned well, eh?" He knelt down beside Stevens, his attention fixed on the handkerchief which he was rolling up to make a bandage.

"Yes," Stevens said. "You haven't forgotten anything except," he spoke the last words very softly as he opened his eyes, "Matiswa and Kawiti."

IT WAS as if he had spoken magic words. As they left his lips the door burst open and the two natives rushed in, tackling Kennedy before he could rise to his feet or draw his revolver.

Over and over they rolled, upsetting chairs and tables; Kennedy blaspheming, roaring like an enraged bull, the natives silent save for the sharp hissing of their indrawn breath.

With a superhuman effort, exerting all of his colossal strength, Kennedy rose to his knees, then to his feet, and flung them from him. He reached for his revolver, but it had fallen from its holster during

the struggle; before he could reach down for it, they were on him again.

The yells of the other natives sounded near.

"Quick," warned Stevens. "Others come."

"I make an end now," Kawiti grunted, and tripped the big man, at the same time throwing all his weight upon him.

Kennedy fell like a log, his head hitting the corner of an upturned table.

Before Stevens could give an order, Matiswa snatched an assegai from the wall and drove it through Kennedy's body, piercing his heart.

"That is good pay, Black One," he said, "for the blows you have given me and for the killing of Guffa—who was a man and my friend.

Vacantly, as if in a stupor, he stood looking at the lifeless body.

Quickly Kawiti released Stevens and chafed his limbs which were stiff from the bonds.

"It is time we go, *Inkosi*," he said. "Come. We will go this way."

Stevens shook his head. He wanted to capture as many of Kennedy's native accomplices as possible. Once they returned to their own territory it would be impossible to get any of them; there they'd be safe. Rhodesian officials had no authority across the Ramaquabane and, even if they had, Stevens would have found it impossible to locate the natives implicated in this affair.

There was a patter of footsteps outside the house. Luckily the shades were drawn. No one could see in.

"Stay outside until I am ready," Stevens shouted roughly, endeavoring to imitate Kennedy's voice.

There was a confused murmur of grumbling.

"Make haste," one cried. "We are thirsty."

"Tell me quickly, Kawiti," Stevens whispered. "How is the white man, Courtland? Where is he? Will he live?"

"We found him in the bush near the place where the cattle were run. We carried him to the police huts. Save that he will have a sore head for many days he is unharmed. He bade us come up here swiftly and to let him be. So we obeyed, that being in our minds."

Stevens nodded in satisfaction.

"*Inkosi*," it was Matiswa speaking, "if I have done wrong——"

"You acted hastily, true, but the provocation was great, Matiswa. That will be forgotten. In all things else you have played the part of a man—that will be remembered."

Outside the natives were growing impatient, yelling for admission.

Stevens picked up Kennedy's revolver; his own had been lost sometime during the night. Matiswa and Kawiti quickly restored the room to a semblance of order and on the table Stevens placed a row of bottles from the cupboard. Then the natives armed themselves with guns from the wall and took cover behind a curtain which hung across the rear of the room.

Striding to the door, Stevens flung it open, standing behind it so that none of the natives who burst into the room saw him. Actually they had no eyes for anything but the bottles on the table, and they rushed toward them with wild whoops of anticipation. When they had all entered, fifteen altogether, Stevens shut the door with a bang.

"Hands up!" he shouted in the vernacular.

With a look of surprized incredulity they turned to face him. Then they turned again and saw the guns of the two police boys.

For a moment they hesitated, considering fight; then they surrendered, grinning sheepishly. They had expected feasting and drinking; instead they found this. The suddenness of it beat them and they meekly squatted down on their haunches in obedience to a command from Stevens. Nor did they offer any resistance as the two police boys bound them together with a stout rein which was hanging on the wall.

Stevens sighed with relief and was all at once conscious of feeling very tired. His bones ached; his head throbbed.

"A man told me of a break in the fence. *Au-a!*" Kawiti was making a song of the night's happenings. "I went to repair it. Darkness came swiftly. A voice called to me, the voice of Matiswa. I went to him. He told me of evil men who waited for me. I hid with him. So we saw all the happenings at the fence. And none knew we watched. When all was done we came to this place to take the *inkosi* out of the hands of the evil one. *Au-a!* Great is Matiswa! Great is Kawiti! Great is *Inkosi* Stevens!"

Stevens smiled happily—but not at Kawiti's song. It is doubtful if he heard it. He was thinking of the morrow; of the things he would say to Grace Courtland—and wondering what would be her answer.

PUBLIC FAVOR

THE public response to THE FRONTIER has rolled in on us in such an overwhelming wave of letters and telegrams that we are completely engulfed and find it almost impossible to make a choice of comments for publication. Readers and authors alike have written so interestingly that we feel every one of them ought to have his say in the discussion. Naturally, that is impossible. Our space is limited because no matter how much we like to gossip at the TRADING POST we all have the main work of the frontier to do out in the mountains, on the desert, or on the trail. For this magazine, fiction and fact stories of the great frontiers are our main interest, and we cannot take too much space for the TRADING POST. Therefore, we have chosen chiefly the letters which refer directly to the material in this number of the magazine. In addition we are printing a few from readers generally.

So with this issue THE FRONTIER may be said to be firmly launched as a magazine of fiction and fact, detailing in all its infinite varieties the stories of the frontiers of civilization in all their many fascinating phases. You will notice that this is a magazine of long complete stories. In every issue there is a complete novel and several complete novelettes as well as a goodly portion of short stories of various lengths. In addition to this, we aim to give you in every issue, several brief articles and editorials in which some of the historical interest of the frontiers will be presented to you, not as fiction but as fact. Verily the facts of the winning of the West were as interesting as any fiction. With articles by Michael Williams, Clarence E. Mulford, Arthur Chapman, Talbot Mundy, Stewart Edward White and Eugene Cunningham on the schedule for you, you can see that the future numbers hold material not only of absorbing interest, but of great historical value.

BITS OF HISTORY

IT IS gratifying to see how well the little historical articles which appear at the end of some of our stories have been received. The "King Charley" item, by Harold J. Ashe, which appeared in our first issue brought the following good letter and anecdote from Dan Beard, famous prophet of outdoor living and founder of the Boy Scout idea in America.

"Very much interested in Volume 1, No. 1 of THE FRONTIER," he says. "Particularly interested in the note about 'King Charley.'

"As Colonel Thomas Carter's 'good barge *Rover*' was drifting down the river, a fussy Frenchman on the bank hailed the barge and asked to be taken aboard. The Yankee pine was promptly sent ashore to bring the passenger aboard the craft. As he stepped on deck Colonel Carter said, 'Well, what's your name?' 'I, zar,' said the Frenchman, drawing himself up and puffing out his chest, 'I, zar, am ze King of France!' 'Well, tumble aboard, King, blank, blank your eyes, and take hold of that sweep; put some beef on it!'

"Some years afterward when Louis Philippe ascended the throne, the colonel dryly remarked, 'If that man doesn't make a better king than he did a flatboatman, France is going to have a blank poor king.'

"As a boy I was very proud of this incident, and whenever I heard anyone boast-

ing of their ancestors or family, I would cry, 'Shucks, the King of France once worked for my granddaddy.'"

Incidentally, this letter started us on the trail of a fine editorial from Mr. Beard, which will appear in an early number.

The short articles on the "Camas Root" and "The Western Ramble of Jedediah S. Smith," both by Clarence E. Mulford, found an interested reader in Clarence B. Bagley, Secretary of the Department of Public Works of Seattle. A real old-timer is Mr. Bagley!

Mr. Clarence E. Mulford,
c/o THE FRONTIER.
Dear Mr. Mulford:

THE FRONTIER has just been laid on my table by a friend. Have only read the two sketches from your pen:—Jedediah S. Smith and Camas Root. Both are accurate—a virtue rare in these days of moving picture stories, "Covered Wagons," etc.

"Camas Root" returned me to the bank of the Santiam, a beautiful mountain stream emptying into the Willamette, when a boy companion and I found a hidden cache of camas and enjoyed a feast that I have remembered for more than seventy years. Candy and sweetmeats were scarce in those days.

My parents brought me to Old Oregon in 1852, the year Ezra Meeker arrived there, but I have not been advertised as much as he.

Incidentally, he is entitled to all the advertising given him, as he has given all his time to the public for more than twenty years and has only had his food and clothes out of it all. He has not one hundred dollars he can call his own. At one time he was wealthy, but the hop louse came along in the night and next morning he was a pauper.

There was a little of the cattle raising, cowboy experiences in the Willamette Valley in the early days, but enough of it that I can appreciate the fidelity and wholesomeness of your stories.

Shall look for more from you in THE FRONTIER.

With best wishes,

Clarence B. Bagley,
Secretary, Dept. of Public Works,
City of Seattle.

There are more "Western Rambles" coming.

The stagecoach bill o' fare was not without its endorsers. One of these was Dick Halliday, of the Rancho El Dorado, New Mexico, whose family had quite a bit to do with the old stagecoach line:

"The bill of fare of the stagecoaching company tickled me," he writes. "Although a bit early in point of time, I am keeping it on file. You see, Old Ben Halliday was the man who bought out Russell, Majors and Waddell just after the Pony Express came to an end. He used to operate the Overland Stage Company and doubtless, for all I know, the dining-rooms, too."

THE FILIBUSTERS

AMONG the most picturesque and adventurous figures in our history are the filibusters, those turbulent spirits always spoiling for a fight. Much has been said against them, yet, withal, there is a good bit to be said in their favor. In this issue Eugene Cunningham has well depicted, in "The Trail of Doom," the ill-fated expedition of Henry Crabb.

"Whether we praise as energetic, or deplore as unethical, the filibusters, we have to admit that their ambitions and often heroic ventures furnish a mighty colorful, romantic chapter of our American history," he contends. "Rhousset de Boulbon, Walker and Watkins, Walker and Henningsen, Henry Crabb—these and many others of lesser importance, have as much place in our histories, as examples of American spirit, as the figures of the Revolutionary, Civil, Spanish-American or World Wars.

"Incidentally, the term 'filibuster' may be considered as having two meanings: as applied to those who mixed in Cuban efforts for independence it covered generally such gun-running and daredevitry as that which has made famous 'Dynamite Johnny.' Filibusters of this more or less altruistic sort went to Cuba to aid the natives in making themselves independent. They smuggled in arms and ammunition and served as officers both ashore and afloat.

"But the other, and generally earlier, filibuster was an ambitious chap who found a republic too small for his Napoleonic dreams; he wanted to rule a country of his own. So he gathered a bunch of efficient malcontents and led the march to some land, generally Mexico and Central America, where he felt strong enough to establish himself as king.

"The atmosphere of the United States, in the 'fifties, was peculiarly favorable to filibusters. The Texan Revolution, the Mexican War, had roused a keen interest in Latin-American countries, with attendant mixture of hatred and contempt for their peoples. Returning soldiers spread information and in every section of the United States even the stay-at-home knew of border conditions. Annexation of Mexico, in whole or part, was freely discussed. Then there was that restlessness which has been the aftermath of our every war.

"In 'The Trail of Doom' I have tried to show, with fidelity to both the specific history of Crabb's ill-fated venture and the spirit of country and time, how a typical malcontent got the filibustering bee and easily collected followers.

"In large and small, the expedition's make-up, conduct, movements, are faithfully pictured. If Dallas Leigh is fictitious, actually with Crabb was T. D. Johns, ex-West Pointer. Because Crabb was no iron-fisted despot like Walker, every man marched toward his death in the Caborca burial-ground, one boy, Charlie Evans, being spared. I have taken pains to touch very lightly on the barbarity of this execution. In the histories, the bare outlines are nauseating."

AN ECHO FROM THE .303

MODERN Labrador and historical Canada are the chosen fiction fields of William Byron Mowery—fiction fields and fact fields, as well, for he certainly knows his ground.

"The genesis of 'Voice of the .303' came out of my lamentable failure to kill the granddaddy of all West Texas wild turkeys," he says of his story which appears in this number. "I located an immense gobbler and assured my partner that I was going to shoot him (the turkey) at sunrise the next morning. He (my partner) spiked my 25-35 cartridges and got the big turkey, while I got the big idea.

"Texas is a long hail from the Northland where I learned to trap muskrats and mink when I had to use a stick to lever down the spring, and to hunt game when I had to prop up that long-barreled Winchester on a forked staub. Followed some years of wide trapping, sugar-making, dog-training and hunting. Then musicianship with traveling bands for a short while. Finally drifted into a university and grabbed off a couple degrees. Then two years on a university faculty, and now back to rifle, camera and notebook, with an ambition to put down faithfully in stories some of the things I've seen."

Liveyere and *komatik* are terms not often met in fiction, yet quite simple in their derivation.

"Liveyere is *live here*," Mr. Mowery explains, "and means the year-around residents on the Labrador who fish in summer and trap inland in winter; in distinction to the NFL fishermen who visit it in cod and 'swilin'' seasons only. The term is somewhat analagous with 'sourdough.' A komatik (from Eskimo kamaatik) is the long, narrow, pliant dog sled."

AMONG THE NEWCOMERS

WE ARE all rather newcomers to THE FRONTIER, so, with the party so large, it has been a bit hard to make the proper introductions. Albert William Stone, whose story, "Min and the Kids" appears in this issue, has a few words to tell you about the tough life of a story writer:

The first story I ever wrote, at the age of seventeen, was accepted by a daily newspaper, the *Herald*, at Grand Rapids, Michigan. The editor explained that he couldn't pay me anything, however. He made it clear that, with a staff of brilliant reporters at his beck and call, any one of whom could have turned out a dozen such stories as I had submitted at a sitting, it would be poor business to pay a rank outsider anything. However, the story was printed the following Sunday, and I was the coming literary light of the generation, in the eyes of my fond relatives. I'd like to see that story now!

It was twenty years before I succeeded in getting my second story accepted. This time I got a check for twenty-five dollars. I was compelled to split it, fifty-fifty, with a chap who suggested the plot. He went all over town exhibiting the story, when it came out, and swore that he was the real author of it. I suppose he was, at that. Anyway, I regard him as being responsible for my break into the fiction field; for from then on I've sold with fair regularity to the all-fiction market. Like many other scribblers, I received my training in a newspaper office, having been a reporter and feature writer for various newspapers over a period of about twelve years. Now I enjoy the friendship of quite a number of cowmen, ex-cowmen, former lumberjacks, etc. It all helps!

Albert William Stone.

"THEY SAY——"

MANY have been the fine letters of welcome and encouragement from THE FRONTIER readers! Space unfortunately prohibits publishing all but a very few of them, and only a bit of those.

A real pioneer heads the welcoming committee:

Editor, THE FRONTIER,
Dear Sir:

I have just seen the first copy of THE FRONTIER, and have enjoyed it very much. It represents an epoch in American history that we would do well to emphasize. Ours is a family of pioneers: my father was a wagon master in the old days when freighting was done by ox team from Westport, (now Kansas City) to California, and the West and early days are a familiar topic to me. Long may the Red Star have a place in the firmament.

Sincerely,
Hugh F. Grinstead,
President, Missouri Writers Guild,
Columbia, Missouri.

Clem Yore's story, "Easy Goin' of the Box Plumb Bob," certainly received its share of the enthusiasm. For example:

Editor, THE FRONTIER.
Dear Sir:

"Easy Goin' of the Box Plumb Bob," by Clem Yore, has so much realism in it that it it a pleasure to me to compliment you on securing so meritorious a bit depicting life in the Far West.

I think that no one could write such a story unless he had lived in the West and mingled with the people of the plains and mountains, as Mr. Yore evidently has. Too many so-called Western stories are written by persons who obtain their knowledge of the subject from other books. But the fellow who has ridden a mountain pony for days at a time, and breathed clouds of dust, lived on a diet of bacon sandwiches and coffee for days at a time—that fellow knows something about Western life, the real stuff.

E. H. Cahill,
839 West End Ave.,
New York City.

And this bit from Eugene Cunningham:

With all best wishes and congratulations on the make-up of the first issue! That story of Clem Yore's about the hawk-moths took me down to the cow country I know; I hung out in El Paso six-seven years ago; watched a Texas Ranger shoot a knife out of a Greek's hand at a distance of fifty-odd feet, from the hip on a quick draw. Day before I pulled out last in 1920 a man pushed ahead of me, drew a Remington .41 and let go both barrels into an acquaintance of his. Wicked country. Or it used to be.

Eugene Cunningham.

Clem Yore's new novelette, "Micky Malone from San Antone," in our next number, will be another rip-snorting Western yarn.

H. C. Wire, of Laguna Beach, California, writer and desert prospector, nicely phrases one of the fundamental purposes of THE FRONTIER as follows:

THE FRONTIER strikes me as a magazine with a mission. At least it can be that along with its entertainment. We are a new nation, almost too new to consider we have a past. Yet it seems to me the time has come to acknowledge and strengthen the traditions that do lie behind us; to take those heroic times that are now but dates in history and make them inspirational through fiction.

Nothing can create a firmer national unity. If I and Frenchy the Wop, and the lad from Herring Bay can all thrill to the same tale of a great pioneer, gaining the same pride and courage from it, are we not brought closer together? Just a plea for understanding. Then we can begin by understanding what is behind the country to which we have sworn allegiance, or into which we have come by birth.

Theories, of course. But I believe THE FRONTIER can come mighty close to making theory a fact.

H. C. Wire.

Frank C. Robertson's "The Fence Builders" came in for its share of appreciation. Hear what Romaine Lowdermilk has to say about it:

I have just finished reading the first number of THE FRONTIER. The two soldier stories were first rate, especially "The Silver Saint of Baliuag." Magruder Maury has been in the Philippines, all right, and he knows how to write a story.

Let me tell you, you're lucky to get that story, by Frank C. Robertson. It will be a long time before you can pick up another with the same appeal to people who really know the West. "The Fence Builders" is real. It is real! The characters are not idle types; they are genuine people. It has a sense of reality, given through characterization, situations and scenery which we, who know the West, can recognize as Western.

Yours for THE FRONTIER,
Romaine H. Lowdermilk,
Wickenburg,
Arizona.

THE NEXT FRONTIER

CLEM YORE will be back again in the next issue of THE FRONTIER with a lively Western novelette, "Micky Malone from San Antone." From the minute that Micky spots a poker dealer executing a little-finger shift with the deck, things start to happen. There is a rodeo, a thrilling bulldogging scene, some great riding and shooting—altogether the tale is a fitting running mate for "Easy Goin' of the Box Plumb Bob."

Albert Sidney Wetjen will contribute the complete novel in the next issue, a story that starts on a Mexican ranch, and finishes in a thrilling chase through the South Seas. "The Sea Gypsy" is the story of a life devoted to vengeance.

In "The Snare," Kenneth Perkins has given us a Western novelette that is decidedly unusual. Grim it is, but fascinating. Another Western story contributor will be Edwin Hunt Hoover with a novelette, "Into Devil's Domain." A weird country was this Devil's Domain, "where a man could lose his soul," and Mr. Hoover has laid a great story in it.

Among the short story contributors will be Eugene Cunningham with a tale of the buccaneers, and Oscar Schisgall with another of his fine South American pioneering stories. In "Black Jack—Wanted, Dead or Alive," Arthur Chapman has written another article depicting a notorious character of the Old West.

Altogether, from the opening poem by Henry Herbert Knibbs, to the TRADING POST, we think you'll like the next FRONTIER.

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..Headache	..Flat Feet	..Weak Eyes
..THINNESS	..Stomach Disorders	..Gastritis
..Rupture	..Constipation	..Heart Weakness
..Lumbago	..Biliousness	..Poor Circulation
..Neuritis	..Torpid Liver	..Skin Disorders
..Neuralgia	..Indigestion	..Despondency
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